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Issue 182

NEON

FIREWORKS

MOVIES GALORE FOR THE WINTER MONTHS!

THE GIRL IN TWILIGHT / NARUTO SHIPPUDEN / COMPETITION / THAT TIME I GOT REINCARNATED AS A SLIME / POSTERS / J-LIFE / GUNDAM THUNDERBOLT: DECEMBER SKY / GRANBLUE FANTASY



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UK KAWAII

SIX CHEERLEADERS OF CUTE SHARE THEIR STORIES WITH US!

TONY CHING

THE MASTER OF ACTION FILMMAKING INTERVIEWED

COSTUME QUEEN

HIKARI GREEN ON COSPLAYING ACROSS THE WORLD



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SOME SILVER SCREEN ACTION!



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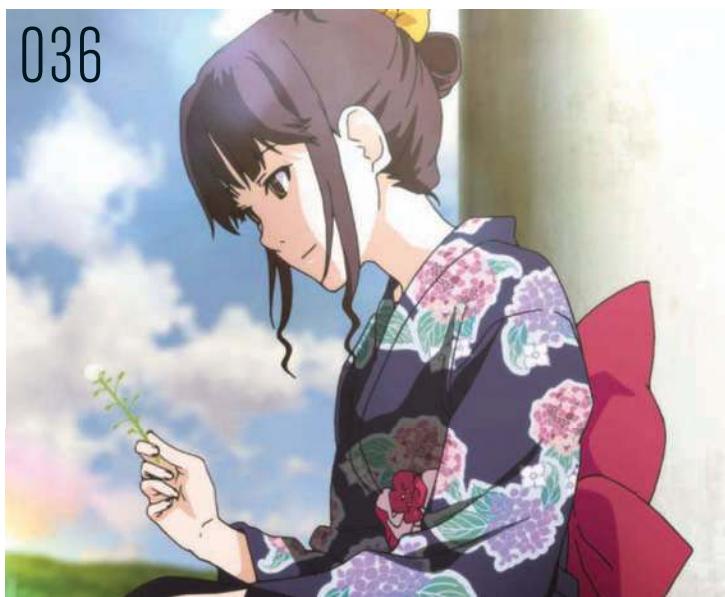
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WELCOME

WELCOME TO issue 182 of NEO! We're in the dark times... No, I haven't gone all political on you (because if I started, I'd never stop...)! I'm talking, of course, about that lull after Halloween and Bonfire Night, before Christmas really kicks in, and everyone is complaining about Christmas coming too early, it being too dark, too cold, and that Christmas has crept up on them and they haven't done any gift shopping yet. What better way to spend the month of November and early December than with some excellent Asian entertainment? Well, have we got plenty lined up for you this issue!

If you flip this magazine, you'll find a bumper feature about the incredible cinematic history of Zatoichi, as we celebrate the blind swordsman in all his glory in time for the Criterion Collection's release of his first 25 movies. David West takes a look at the history behind the character, and reveals the secrets behind his evergreen popularity!

We also take a look at a couple of new streaming shows in the form of *The Girl in Twilight* on page 028, and *That Time I Got Reincarnated As A Slime*, on page 030. And we have plenty to say about a slew of upcoming anime movies in our lead feature which starts on page 008 and sees Jake Boniface bravely try and dissect all the big (and small) screen offerings coming our way in the winter months.

And, don't forget to check out our onslaught of cute, which runs from page 038 all the way to 046: the perfect antidote to those dark nights!

Until next time!

GEMMA COX, EDITOR

MEET THE TEAM

EMILY VALENTINE



"This month I've been exploring how Japan's 'kawaii' culture of cute inspires us here in the UK, by chatting to six people with a passion for all things cutesy and colourful from up and down the country. Check it out on page 038!"

ANDREW OSMOND



"I interviewed the wonderful Hikari Green, a Japanese cosplayer who's seen cosplay culture all around the world. Among other things, she explains why the manic Halloween celebrations in Tokyo aren't really cosplay events... But I'm still going!"

MITCHELL LINEHAM



"MCM this year has been one of my favourites, and I met Nolan North (again) and Sam Riegel! I've been playing a lot of FFXIV, Dragon Ball FighterZ and My Hero One's Justice, and I don't see me slowing down soon."

JACOB BONIFACE



"This month, I've been taking a look at some of the cinematic gems we've got coming our way - I didn't realise myself quite how many were making it into theatres, so I'm definitely gonna be breaking out the popcorn a lot over the next few months!"

DAVID WEST



"I definitely got a kick out of interviewing Tony Ching for NEO this month - *A Chinese Ghost Story* was one of the first films that sparked my ongoing obsession with Hong Kong cinema. The other was Jackie Chan's *Police Story*."

TOM SMITH



"I raided a bunch of Tokyo's board game shops and discovered some right gems! Current fave is *Dwarf Slayer*, a game about Dwarf drinking culture, and drinking as much as possible without falling asleep and being left with the bar tab. Much like real life..."

ALEX JONES



"After waiting all year my most anticipated anime of 2018 has finally arrived - SSSS. Gridman! I'm a huge fan of the original series and Trigger have been doing a magnificent job so far. So many hidden references to be found!"

JONATHAN CLEMENTS

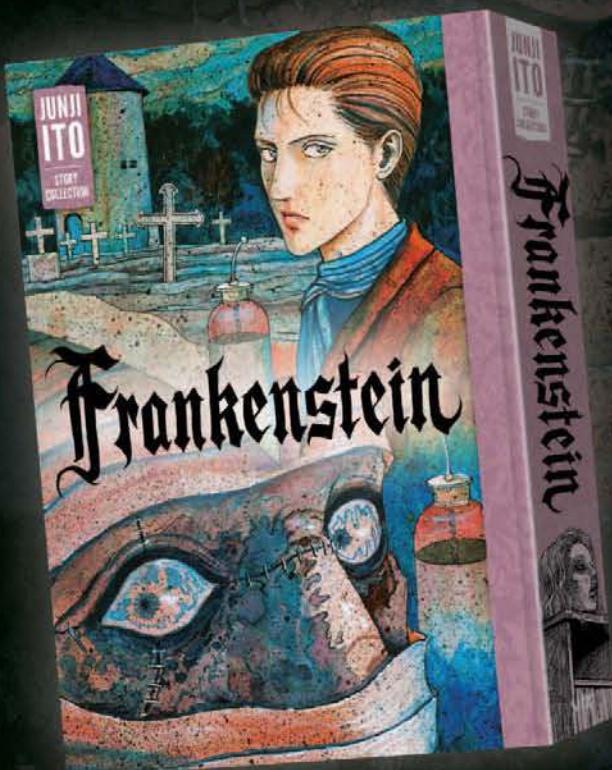


"I'm just putting the finishing touches to my new book with Andrew Osmond, an account of Isao Takahata's notorious 1968 flop *Little Norse Prince*. For a film that nobody apparently went to see, it has a lot of variants - four different, legal subtitle sets and counting!"



Frankenstein

JUNJI
ITO
STORY
COLLECTION

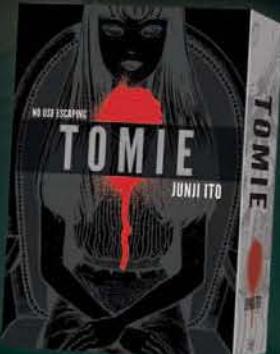
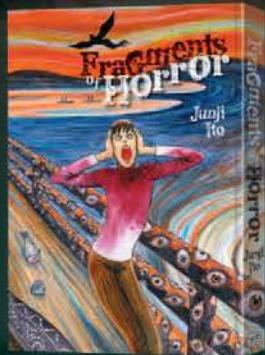
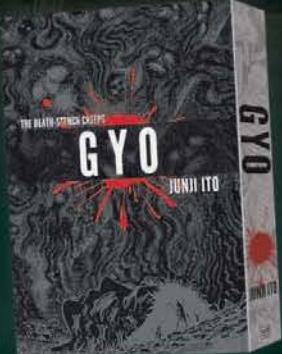
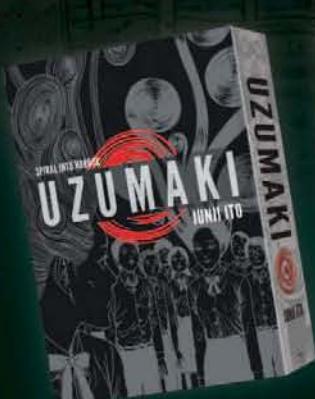


JUNJI ITO MEETS MARY SHELLEY! THE MASTER OF HORROR MANGA BENDS ALL HIS SKILL INTO BRINGING THE ANGUISHED AND SOLITARY MONSTER—AND THE FOUL BEAST WHO CREATED HIM—TO LIFE WITH THE BRILLIANTLY DETAILED CHIAROSCURO HE IS KNOWN FOR.

ALSO INCLUDED ARE SIX TALES OF OSHIKIRI—A HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT WHO LIVES IN A DECAYING MANSION CONNECTED TO A HAUNTED PARALLEL WORLD. UNCANNY DOPPELGÄNGERS, UNFORTUNATELY MURDERED FRIENDS, AND A WHOLE LOT MORE ARE IN STORE FOR HIM.

BONUS:

THE ITO FAMILY DOG! THRILL TO THE ADVENTURES OF NON-NON ITO, AN ADORABLE MALTESE!



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BIG SCREEN BONANZA!

The next few months promise a bumper crop of feature-length titles to while away the long nights. NEO's Jacob Boniface grabs some popcorn and looks at a few upcoming cinematic stunners!

KICKING THINGS OFF is a superhero smash hit that practically needs no introduction. *My Hero Academia* has been one of the biggest series in shonen anime, or the medium in general, for the last two years, and it's finally making its big screen debut! Even better, fans of Midoriya's heroic journey will get the chance to see the movie the way it was meant to be watched, as cinemas up and down the UK will be screening the movie – entitled *My Hero Academia: Two Heroes* – for two days in December. The film, which was the fourth highest-performing movie in Japan during its opening week, follows protagonist and fledgling hero Izuku, as he and mentor All Might become embroiled in a fiendish plot during a visit to a convention dedicated to superheroism.

While the pair are no strangers to taking down super powered bad guys at this point, the adventure of *Two Heroes* is a situation unlike any that either hero has faced up until now. While All Might is known around the world as a symbol of justice, his former injuries have left him nearly completely depleted, and so it'll be up to the relatively untested Izuku and his friends from the hero training program – as well as new ally and science whiz Melissa Shield – to save the day from this latest villainous threat.

Making the transition from anime series to big screen side-story can often be a dicey prospect. With no original source material to draw upon and a limited runtime to develop both story and new characters, a lot of anime movies can be left feeling a little less impactful than their TV counterparts. However, it looks like there's a strong possibility that this won't

be the case with *Two Heroes* – original manga creator Kohei Horikoshi has supervised the entire project, as well as creating the character designs for the movie's new additions to the cast. And while Horikoshi didn't devise the script directly, it has still been left in excellent hands, with Yosuke Kuroda writing the screenplay for the movie. A veteran in the anime screenwriting game, Kuroda has a slew of hits under his belt – with such works as *Trigun*, *Highschool of the Dead*, and *Tenchi Muyo* being just a few of the beloved titles he's worked on in the past. Add to that studio Bones' pedigree for exemplary and awe-inspiring animation work, and it looks like we've got a surefire hit on our hands!

As mentioned, the film has already performed remarkably well across the countries that have already gotten a cinematic release – namely Japan, Australia, and the USA. All signs point to *Two Heroes* being a more than worthy successor to the series' excellent legacy, which makes the aforementioned UK release all the more exciting! The movie will be shown in dozens of cities nationwide on 4-5 December, but showings are relatively limited, so make sure to snap up your tickets as soon as you can to avoid missing out!

CULT HITS

But *My Hero Academia* isn't the only success story of recent times! In just a few short years, *Love, Chunibyo & Other Delusions!* has become a cult hit in the romantic comedy genre, thanks to its weird and wacky sensibilities. Even for anime, this is an unconventional kind of love story – one that >>>





Love, Chunibyo, & Other Delusions! The Movie: Take On Me

1. Rikka punishes wrongdoers with her powers. Or does she? 2. The ladies of *Chunibyo* strike their best heroic pose! 3. Of course, the team wouldn't be complete without Chimera the cat!

BLASTS FROM THE PAST!

It's not just new releases making a splash this season, as a few old classics will be getting a new breath of life in the form of HD rereleases! Makoto Shinkai's heart wrenching modern classic *5 Centimeters Per Second* is finally making the jump to Blu-ray, as is *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence*. Both movies have always been famous for their breathtaking visuals, so these new formats will make them look even better than you remember!

>>> follows the romantic entanglements of高中生 Yuta and Rikka, an ostensibly mismatched pair who have history with what's known as 'chunibyo' syndrome. For those who haven't seen the series, a 'chunibyo' is someone, usually in their early teens, who adopts a fantastical persona with roots in delusional behaviour, attempting to convince their peers and family members that they possess some form of magical or supernatural powers. While Yuta has eschewed his former life as the 'Dark Flame Master', his new romantic interest is Rikka, who continues to act as though she is a magical antihero – namely the possessor of the cursed 'Wicked Eye'. While their relationship threatens to drag Yuta back into a chapter of his life that he'd rather leave behind, he and the endearing (if bewildering) Rikka definitely have chemistry, so much so that the pair's romantic misadventures have provided enough mayhem to fill several series, OVAs, and a previous feature film!

But despite the many previous titles covering the burgeoning relationship between these two crazy kids, they're still going as strong as ever, with their latest adventure – *Love,*

Chunibyo, & Other Delusions! The Movie: Take On Me – seeing a UK release early this December. Some of you lucky readers might already have had the chance to see the movie ahead of time, as Manga organised a special fan screening at the most recent London Comic Con, but for everyone else who couldn't make it, the DVD and Blu-Ray release is just a few short weeks away!

The latest movie sees Yuta and Rikka approaching their final days of high school – but with adulthood on the horizon, will Rikka's eccentric ways become too much to take? To make matters even more dramatic, Rikka's sister has suggested that they both move to Italy, which puts her relationship with Yuta in real jeopardy! At the behest of their equally weird and wonderful friends in the student council, the lovestruck pair embark on a makeshift elopement, taking one last madcap adventure before the responsibilities of adult life (and a life without magical superpowers, no less) catch up to them! Of course, with this couple, nothing goes quite as smoothly as planned, and there are plenty of 'supernatural' shenanigans



Love, Chunibyo, & Other Delusions!
The Movie: Take On Me



Love, Chunibyo, & Other Delusions!
The Movie: Take On Me



Fireworks



Fireworks



Fireworks

"ALL SIGNS POINT TO TWO HEROES BEING A MORE THAN WORTHY SUCCESSOR TO THE SERIES' EXCELLENT LEGACY, WHICH MAKES THE AFOREMENTIONED UK RELEASE ALL THE MORE EXCITING!"

along the way!

Take On Me might well be the last caper for Yuta, Rikka, and the rest of their oddball squad, but it looks like it'll be a perfect ending to the series. From the beginning, the series has been brought to the screen by beloved studio Kyoto Animation, and fans of the show will be pleased to hear that the entire original production team and voice acting cast have returned to the project, to make the latest movie everything that longtime viewers will expect from this potentially final chapter in the story, and hopefully more! *Love, Chunibyo & Other Delusions! The Movie: Take On Me* is understandably one of the season's most anticipated romcom romps, but with its release coming on 10 December, it's not long until we'll all get to make up our minds on this movie!

LET THE FIREWORKS FLY!

When it comes to anime auteurs, there's few more respected and talented working in the industry today than Akiyuki Shinbo. Known for his distinct visual stylings, that combine the cuteness so often associated with the medium with a darker, more nightmarish edge, this director and animator has brought to life some of the most iconic series of the last decade, such as *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* and the *Monogatari* series. It's been a while since Shinbo brought anything to the big screen,

but judging by what we've seen so far of his new directorial effort, *Fireworks*, it looks like he certainly hasn't lost his touch!

Fireworks is a bittersweet coming-of-age story about a pair of teens, Norimichi and Nazuna, who become romantically entangled despite the love triangle formed by the two of them and Norimichi's best friend Yusuke. If that all sounds pretty normal fare for a director as known for weirdness as Shinbo, everything changes when the kids – who decide to run away together – come across a supernatural orb that grants the ability to reverse time. Seeing this as a chance to rewrite the decisions in their past that have led them to their current set of desperate circumstances, our protagonists begin casually screwing with the space-time continuum (as you do), in an effort to improve their lot in life.

Anyone who's ever seen a time travel movie will have probably already guessed that things do not go particularly well for them from this point onwards, and events get ever more complicated as Norimichi and Nazuna attempt to redo even their do-overs and restore things to how they were in the first place. Despite all the strangeness, *Fireworks* looks like it actually focuses more on the growing relationship between the two new lovers, as they try to find their place in a world that is changing rapidly around them (occasionally due to time-travelling). **>>>**

LIVE-ACTION HEROES!

As if the animated version of *My Hero Academia* movie wasn't exciting enough, it's just been announced that a live-action feature is reportedly in the works!

Movie producers Legendary, the company responsible for the upcoming *Detective Pikachu* and *Godzilla: King of the Monsters*, have planned to bring the movie to a worldwide release, making it a part of the superhero movie phenomenon!

BIG SCREEN BONANZA!



LAYTON LEGACY!

P.A. works, the animation studio behind the visually-stunning *Maquia*, are also responsible for the animation work in a number of other projects, such as the PS2 classic *Wild Arms 3* and the critically-acclaimed *Professor Layton* series! The team also worked the *Professor Layton* movie adaptation, so their movie production credentials are already well-proven!

"MAQUIA NOT ONLY HAS A ONE HUNDRED PERCENT RATING ON REVIEW SITE ROTTEN TOMATOES (A FEAT WHICH ONLY A RELATIVE FEW MOVIES MANAGE TO ACCOMPLISH), BUT IS ALSO UNDER CONSIDERATION TO BE ONE OF THE OSCAR NOMINEES FOR THE CATEGORY OF BEST ANIMATED FEATURE!"

>>> The movie, despite being the first time the story has been on the screen in an animated format, is actually an adaptation of an earlier work of the same name. The original *Fireworks* was a live-action TV drama directed and written by Shunji Iwai. If that name sounds familiar to you, it's because he also penned *The Case of Hana and Alice*, another animated adaptation of his previous work that saw a release back in 2015. Although Iwai isn't working on the anime version in this case, we're still very excited to see what new director Shinbo can bring to the story!

Of course, you can't have an Akiyuki Shinbo project without the rest of the team over at SHAFT, the studio that Shinbo has been partnered with for the majority of his previous beloved works. For anyone who isn't familiar with the studio's work, SHAFT is famous for their astounding animation, and *Fireworks* looks set to be no exception to that rule. Even just the movie's trailer showcases some gorgeous scenes that make even the most mundane of everyday events seem breathtakingly beautiful. To check the movie out for yourself in the way it was meant to be seen, check your local cinema listings from 15 November onwards, as *Fireworks* is joining the ever-growing list of anime features making their way onto the big screen!

THE MIRACULOUS MIRAI

Speaking of famed and beloved anime directors, few have more cinematic smash hits on their resume than Mamoru Hosoda! His latest movie, *Mirai*, is also seeing a release in theatres this November, which is especially exciting considering his track record for releasing visually stunning movies, such as *Summer Wars* and *Wolf Children* (though really, any of his movies would slot neatly into this category!).

Both a writer and director, Hosoda tends to focus on cinematic works that deal with the ideas of family, and *Mirai* is no different in this instance. The story revolves around Kun, a four year-old whose world is rocked – like so many small children – by the introduction of a baby sibling, in Kun's case the titular Mirai. Both protective of but intimidated by his new sister, Kun's story differs from the norm when an adult version of Mirai emerges from the future, to take her younger / older brother on a series of adventures that will eventually help Kun to learn how to adjust his life to the presence of Mirai's infant self.

The opening salvo of *Mirai*'s cinematic release will have already passed us by by the time this issue goes to print, but have no fear if you didn't see it yet, as many cinemas up and down the country will be featuring extra screenings later in the month.



So keep an eye out if you want the chance to check out this exquisitely animated tale of childhood and chronomancy!

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

While a staple of the early to mid 2000s, the *Digimon* franchise's best days were definitely behind it – or so it was thought, prior to the announcement of *Digimon Adventure Tri!* A triumphant, and much-anticipated, return of the original cast of characters, both nostalgic fans and intrigued newcomers have enjoyed the five feature-length *Digimon* titles that have come out over the last few years, but now things are coming to a head with the final chapter in *Tri*'s tumultuous story in the form of the sixth movie, ominously entitled *Our Future*.

It's difficult to mention much of the plot of *Our Future* without spoiling things for people who haven't gotten the chance to catch up with the earlier chapters (although if that's you, you should definitely check them out!), but viewers can be sure that the *Digimon Adventure Tri* finale will include as much explosive action and climactic twists as you could hope for from a series of

movies that has had no shortage of either throughout its run.

Not only is the final chapter getting an individual home release (from Manga Entertainment) on DVD and Blu-ray early this coming December, but the same day will also herald the release of a full *Digimon Adventure Tri* movie boxset, so if you've been holding on for the story to come to its dramatic digi-conclusion before taking a look, then the collection you've been waiting for will be here before you know it! Previous chapters in the Digidestined's third adventure have certainly not disappointed, so let's hope that they stick the landing with an equally exciting finale. With some excellent art from Toei Animation, and a home release that includes the vocal talents of the original *Digimon Adventure* cast, it looks like that's a pretty safe bet!

OKADA'S MAQUIA

If you're more interested in something even more fantastical to warm your heart this coming winter, then Anime Limited have just the movie for you, heading to your screens this >>>



4. Even after all these years, fan favourite Tentomon still hasn't lost his goofy sense of humour! **5.** Climatic events unfold in the final *Digimon* chapter, as Matt and Gabumon look on in stunned disbelief. **6.** A new Digimon Emperor has emerged from the darkness, but will our heroes be able to defeat him?



Gundam Thunderbolt: December Sky

ROBOTIC RECORD-BREAKER!

This year was an important milestone for the *Gundam* series, as June saw it become the 15th highest-grossing media franchise of all time! With toys, manga, anime, novels, and of course movies, all on the ever-popular subject of giant robots fighting, it's no surprise that *Gundam* has now made more than 15 billion US dollars!

>>> December. *Maquia – When the Promised Flower Blooms* is the latest directorial masterpiece from Mari Okada, one of the most prolific talents working today in the world of anime. While Okada is relatively new to the director's seat, she's had a long and storied career in anime screenwriting, having been at least partially responsible for such series as *Lupin the Third* and *Black Butler*.

Maquia follows the eponymous heroine through a journey of love, loss, and newfound family, across a picturesque fantasy realm. Maquia is a child of a near-immortal race of beings known as Iorph, who live idyllic lives removed from the ordinary humans of the world. But when Maquia's village is attacked by villains seeking the secret of the Iorphs' supernaturally long lifespan, her life is thrown into conflict and chaos. Separated from her people, and finding herself suddenly responsible for the care of a human baby, Maquia must adjust to both a new way of life, and what is effectively a new world to live in, as the movie follows her and her adopted child, Ariel, through the trials and adventures that await them.

While we haven't had the chance to treat ourselves to a screening of *Maquia* yet over here in the UK, it looks like it will do just as well when it makes its way to our shores as it has across the rest of the world – *Maquia* not only has a one hundred percent rating on review site Rotten Tomatoes (a feat which only a relatively few movies manage to accomplish), but is also currently under consideration to be one of the Oscar nominees for the category of Best Animated Feature!

GO GO GUNDAM!

While new and original works are all well and good, there's certainly something comforting about a classic franchise as well! And few carry the same weight, or have the legions of fans, as *Gundam*. The *Gundam* universe shows no signs of slowing

down, even after nearly 40 years of anime series, manga, games, and of course movies. The latest movie, *December Sky*, adapts the first season of the saga – originally broadcast as an online-only miniseries – into a thrilling action sci-fi epic that will see a UK release later this November.

December Sky, which was in turn based on an original manga series by Yasuo Ohtagaki, chronicles the exploits of Io Fleming, an ace in the forces of the Moore Brotherhood, a squadron of *Gundam* pilots who seek revenge on the Principality of Zeon for the destruction of their home. Despite his prodigious skills, Io finds a nemesis and rival in the form of Zeon's best sniper, the tenacious Daryl Lorenz. Fueled by vengeance and bloodlust, the pair duel across the stellar battlefield of the Thunderbolt Sector. However, as the war rages on, will either of this pair of warriors be able to prevail against the other?

Gundam fans and collectors across the country will likely have been frustrated that we haven't had a release of the *Thunderbolt* saga until now, and while Anime Limited are finally bringing this sci-fi skirmish to your screens, the *December Sky* Blu-ray will only be released on a limited edition run, so make sure to snap up a copy if you've been waiting to experience the title for yourself! On the plus side, the release of the Collector's Edition comes with not only an illustration-plastered rigid body case for the movie, but also an A3 poster and set of art cards!

There's definitely enough variety and excitement in this season's cavalcade of anime features to keep even the most voracious of movie buffs busy until 2019. Whether you're into sci-fi action, superhero epics, or heartfelt romance, the next few months have got you covered! But of course, to know which releases are truly worth your time, make sure to keep an eye on future issues of NEO for the verdicts! ●

DIGI-DRAMATICS!

Last year saw the production of another re-telling of the Digidestineds' story, a theatrical stage play version of the *Digimon Adventure Tri* story! Entitled *The August 1st Adventure*, the stage play featured a host of well-known Japanese play actors as both the human characters and their Digimon counterparts, and was met with huge acclaim!





Little Forest

LONDON KOREAN FILM FESTIVAL

On tour 16-25 November

KOREAN FILM FANS take note – the London Korean Film Festival is taking three great movies on a UK tour between 16–25 November, including *The Return*, *Microhabitat* and *Little Forest*.

Director Marlene Choi, a Danish-Korean adoptee, blurs the lines between fact and fiction in her movie *The Return* (2018), which follows Karoline (played by Karoline Sofie Lee, also an adoptee) returning to Korea in order to track down her birth parents. Karoline's personal experiences are channelled into genuine interactions that have created a deeply affecting and emotional journey.

Also following a young woman's journey in Korea is Jeon Go-woon's *Microhabitat* (2018), which examines the struggles of Korean 30-somethings. Mi-so is forced from her apartment and must make her way back into her bandmate's lives in order to protect the basic necessities of her life: cigarettes, whisky, and her boyfriend. The movie has already picked up awards at the Busan and Fantasia film

festivals, and promises a relatable look at urban life.

Finally, based on the manga of the same name comes *Little Forest* (2017), a story about rediscovering your childhood, as director Yim Soon-rye creates a foodie adventure starring *The Handmaiden*'s Kim Tae-ri as Hye-won. Returning to the home she grew up in from a failed jaunt to the big city, Hye-won finds her mother's handwritten notes, or 'little forest', chronicling her quest to cherish her child through homemaking and meal preparation.

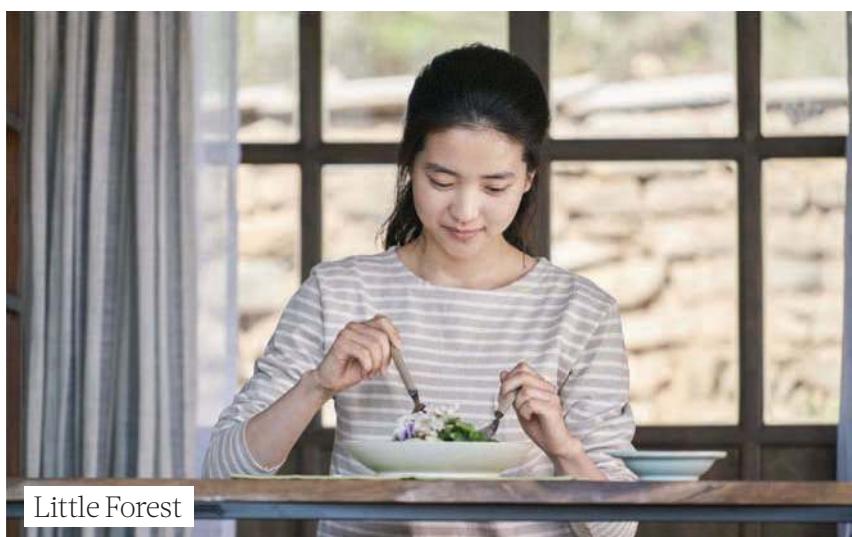
The festival tours to Glasgow Film Theatre, Edinburgh Film House, Manchester HOME, Sheffield Showroom, Nottingham Broadway Cinema, and Belfast Queen's Film Theatre. Find out more here online at koreanfilm.co.uk/site/the-2018-festival-touring-programme. You can also follow the festival on social media through Facebook (@theLKFF), Twitter (@koreanfilmfest), and Instagram (@london_korean_film_festival). ●



The Return



Microhabitat



NEW EXPO, NEW ANIME!

Titles announced this October

A BIENNIAL EVENT, the London MCM Comic Con brings with it more than just the chance to empty your wallet in a buying frenzy and take photos with your favourite celebs – it's also a chance to discover the new titles heading our way courtesy of our favourite anime distributors.

Taking to Twitter, MVM had a bevy of new titles to announce, including *Katsugeki: Touken Ranbu*, *Cells at Work!*, *Record of Grancrest War*, *Sagrada Reset*, STARMYU, *Seven Mortal Sins*, *Scum's Wish*, and *The Heroic Legend of Arslan* season two. They will also be releasing the *Fate/stay night* movies, *Fate/stay night: Heaven's Feel I. presage flower*, and *Fate/stay night: Heaven's Feel II. lost butterfly*. You can preorder many of these titles directly through MVM via their online retailer site, www.anime-on-line.com, and check their release dates at the same time.

Manga Entertainment was proud to announce that it was bringing *Dragon Ball Super: Broly* the movie to theatres in January. Head to their website at brolysback.co.uk for ticket alerts!

Last but not least, Anime Limited were on hand to bury us with a further avalanche of titles, including *Cyber City Oedo 808* (on Blu-ray with its original English soundtrack and dub), *Jin-Roh: The Wolf Brigade* (also on Blu-ray), *Calamity of a Zombie Girl*, *Sword Art Online: Alicization* (following its streaming on Crunchyroll), *Sword Art Online Alternative: Gun Gale Online*, *MEGALOBOX*, *Bartender*, *Welcome to the Ballroom*, *Magic Knight Rayearth* (on Blu-ray) and *PERSONA5: The Day Breakers*.

Make sure you pick up the next issue of NEO for that all important 2019 preview!

NEO AWARDS 2018

Sponsored by SEGA

You still have time to vote in the annual NEO awards, sponsored this year by SEGA. It's easy to vote online with our form, which will be posted on our social media accounts at twitter.com/neo_magazine, and facebook.com/neomagazineuk. All you have to do is select your winner in our categories, and leave the calculating to us! The results will be published in NEO 184, which is on sale 17 January, and you have until 3 December to vote!

NEO'S TOPTEN

Our roundup of the hottest tracks currently blasting on the office stereo

WORDS BY TOM SMITH

1 BABYMETAL – STARLIGHT OUT NOW!

No BABYMETAL news for yonks, and then it all comes at once! The bad news first; YUIMETAL will officially leave the group. Rumours have been rife ever since the youngest member remained mysteriously absent from BABYMETAL's American tour earlier this year. A statement released on babymetal.com reads "YUIMETAL came to a decision that she will no longer be a part of BABYMETAL. We thank her for all of her contributions and wish her all the best in her future endeavours". YUIMETAL also released a statement expressing sorrow for inconveniencing fans and that she wants to "advance towards [her] dreams as Yui Mizuno".

The announcement came simultaneously with the release of new single *Starlight*. At the time of writing its video on YouTube has passed one million views and led to many fans commenting to links in the song and video to the passing of Kami Band guitarist Mikio Fujioka, as well as the departure of YUIMETAL. The ending of the video also teases about what's to come next as seven figures cloaked in red look to the stars.

Then, if that wasn't enough BABYMETAL drama to keep you busy, a graphic novel has just landed too! Entitled *Apocrypha: The Legend Of BABYMETAL*, the 144-pager promises to be an "original story based on BABYMETAL you've never heard before". The book tracks the original trio's journey through various eras and forms slaying the dark forces as they go. The work has been penned by award-winning writer and illustrator GMB Chomichuk and is out now priced at £22.99.

NEW SINGLE! NEW GRAPHIC NOVEL!



DOMINATED LONDON! FILM ON THE WAY!



2 B.T.S. – IDOL 15 NOVEMBER!

The Korean boyband recently smashed the UK with their debut performance in the country, despite one member being chair-bound. A message was read aloud just as they were about to hit the stage, stating that "approximately two hours ago, Jungkook was lightly stretching in the waiting room when he collided with floor furnishings and suffered an injury to his heel... Following the advice of medical staff, Jungkook will take part in the performance tonight, but remain seated without choreography".

While that statement leaves us with more questions than it answers, one thing is confirmed by the end of the evening; B.T.S. are far from a fad and the thousands of fans that packed out London's O2 Arena for two nights are proof of that. At the teary finale, rapper RM commented, "We have waited for today for like, years! When we first heard about breaking the UK charts, it was so amazing and surprising because the UK chart is so well respected. You have the greatest musicians in your country, and in this city, so we feel so grateful for that. We'll never take it for granted. Thank you so much. We love you London!"

An 85-minute documentary film *Burn The Stage* will be hitting UK cinemas on 15 November. Check www.burnthestagethemovie.com.

NEW SINGLE! NEW ALBUM! UK SHOW!



3 LOVEBITES – RISING 21 NOVEMBER

Competing with BABYMETAL for making the most announcements at once is Tokyo's power metal heroines, LOVEBITES! The "Best New Band 2018" Metal Hammer award winners have just revealed their electric new band image, the artwork for their upcoming sophomore album *Clockwork Immortality*, and they've unleashed the first single from the record too!

New single *Rising* is available now ahead of its music video, which is due to strike YouTube around the time of this issue's release. The track is every bit as ferocious, thunderous and dramatic as expected, and delivers the kind of bite only these ladies can muster. LOVEBITES are back in London on Wednesday 21 November to conclude their first proper European tour with a headline show at the O2 Academy Islington. Tickets are on sale now for £17.40. Follow label JPU Records for further news on *Clockwork Immortality*.

4 MUTANT MONSTER – BUB BUB BUBBLE UNTIL 21 NOVEMBER!

The punk trio are teaching us a popular Japanese phrase with the release of their overseas exclusive album *NEKOKABURI*. On the back of the case it simply reads “NEKOKABURI = Lion in Cats Clothing”, a much cuter take on English’s own “wolf in sheep’s clothing”. The CD features ten new songs, including two that have yet to be released in Japan! Those that prefer their music provided through digital services won’t have access to the two new songs, which have been swapped with *Sparkling Energy* and *Summer Ticket*, the UK exclusive tracks from the band’s previous album, available digitally for the first time.

Remaining dates in their UK tour include HYPER JAPAN on 15 and 16 November, Manchester on 18, Birmingham on 20 and London’s Oslo on the 21st.

LONDON DATE!



NEW SINGLE! NEW ALBUM!



8 PASSCODE – TONIGHT

Idol noisemakers PassCode have hit the ground running. They’ve just finished their biggest tour yet in Japan; they’ve released overseas exclusive album *Ex Libris PassCode* which packs some of their best songs to date and includes one entirely new recording; and now they’ve released two videos for each song of their double A single *Tonight / Take You Out*. *Tonight* is less aggressive than *Take You Out* but still features riffs that will get heads-a-banging. Get it now on iTunes or Spotify.

NEW ALBUM! UK TOUR!



6 ONE OK ROCK – CHANGE 5 DECEMBER

The ONE OK ROCK boys are back in town this December for a headline show at Heaven in London on 5 December. The band released latest single *Change* earlier this year ahead of their domestic tour, and it’s available on YouTube in two versions; English or Japanese, with only about 15 seconds of differences between them.

The song itself is a change for the band, with vocalist Taka even going as far as saying that it’s the most pop song the band has written so far. Hear it for yourself in London later this year, and let us know what you think!

9 POLYPHIA FT. ICHIKA – DEATH NOTE OUT NOW!

Texas tech-instrumentalists Polypphia just released latest album *New Levels New Devils* and have teamed up with Japanese guitarist Ichika for one of the tracks. Ichika started gaining popularity outside of Japan via Instagram videos that caught his finger-based wizardry as he zapped his fret board with lightning speed. His track with Polypphia is called *Death Note* and available to listen, stream and watch now from all the usual places. Polypphia will tour the UK in February.

OUT NOW!



5 CRYSTAL LAKE – THE CIRCLE 11-15 DECEMBER!

Tokyo metalcore heroes CRYSTAL LAKE released their brilliant new single *THE CIRCLE* earlier this year following a string of European festival appearances. Now they’re back for another set of fist-swinging, ear-splitting concerts across the continent, this time as support for metal heavyweight Bury Tomorrow and 36 Crazyfists. The boys will be playing at SWX in Bristol on 11 December, O2 Institute Birmingham on 12 December, Glasgow’s Garage on 13 December, Manchester’s O2 Ritz on 14 December, before concluding the tour at the O2 Forum in London. Tickets are on sale now for £21.50 – please note that the Manchester date has already sold out.

7 BANZAI JAPAN – SENSU GA NAI!!!!!! 16, 18 DECEMBER!

The BJ girls (no, they actually initialise themselves as BJ...) are an idol group who pride themselves on representing all aspects of Japanese culture to the world, from sushi to otaku and everything in-between. Each member represents a prefecture in Japan and according to their biography they’re on a secret mission too – whatever that means. They’re also coming to London for HYPER JAPAN and will be performing on Friday and Sunday. They performed at Japan Expo in Paris earlier in the year and could be a lot of fun for those wanting to witness J-idols live.

NEW SINGLE!



10 LADYBABY – DAMEDAME TONO OUT NOW

Within weeks of releasing the *Bite Me* music video, the LADYBABY girls have released another brand-new song and video; *damedame tono*. The video’s description on YouTube states “Overcoming many difficulties, LADYBABY reached the paradise. Introducing J-pop in heavy sound, the evolved ‘KAWAII-DEATH’ was born here!”. See for yourself on their YT channel.

ONE BAD APPLE

JONATHAN CLEMENTS SOLVES A DIGITAL MYSTERY

Anders Gonsalves da Silva lit up the Twittersphere in September with a screed aimed at Apple, accusing them not only of deleting films from his iTunes library without warning, but also offering him nothing but a couple of “rentals” in compensation. The Interweb was soon out in the street with pitchforks and torches, decrying the theft of a consumer’s property.

A few days later, someone pointed out some critical missing information. Da Silva had recently moved house, not just down the road, but from Australia to Canada. He had paid for his videos in Australia, but the sale of an Australian version did not amount to the sale of an identical Canadian version. But it wasn’t until the three films were named – *Cars*, *Cars 2* and *Grand Budapest Hotel* – that I realised what had happened. Apple did not delete his films. He deleted his right to the versions he had bought, by moving to a territory where they were no longer the same films. They were not actually “identical” at all.

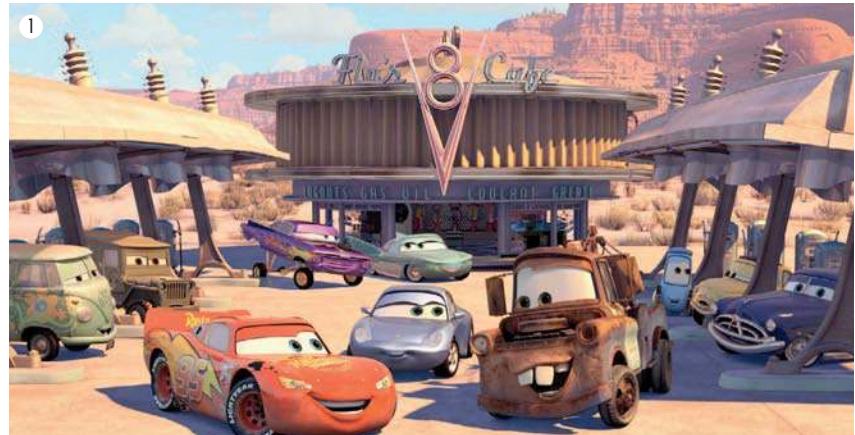
Yes, indeed, we’re back in the world of territorial lockout – familiar to anime fans in days of yore – whereby the tape or disc you buy to watch in one territory is only watchable in that territory, unless you have a special player. The digital version, however, seems a little more complicated.

I can’t speak as to the international variance for *Grand Budapest Hotel*, but having bought copies of *Cars* in several different countries, I can see precisely why the film rights would be slightly different. Many Pixar films drop in a little bit of targeted hyper-localisation, effectively turning each territory’s version into a unique work. In the original *Cars*, for example, Lightning McQueen’s off-screen agent Harv is played by Jeremy Piven in North America, plainly reprising his character as Ari Gold from *Entourage*. But in the UK release (which is presumably the one released in Australia), Harv’s voice is provided by *Top Gear*’s producer-punching petrol-head Jeremy Clarkson, struggling a little to be quite as Californian.

As the Internet ire has died down, it seems that da Silva can “easily” access his films again by moving back to Australia, or by convincing Apple that he has done so with the use of a VPN and an Australian home address on his credit card. But since it would be cheaper to just buy them again in Canada, I guess that’s where we are. If he’d just stuck to DVDs, we wouldn’t be in this mess.

Before you ask, in the Japanese dub of *Cars*, Harv is played by the late Tomoyuki Dan, an actor best known in the anime world as Ishikawa in *Ghost in the Shell: ARISE*, and as the Japanese voice of Ben Stiller. ●

“YES, INDEED, WE’RE BACK IN THE WORLD OF TERRITORIAL LOCKOUT – FAMILIAR TO ANIME FANS IN DAYS OF YORE – WHEREBY THE TAPE OR DISC YOU BUY TO WATCH IN ONE TERRITORY IS ONLY WATCHABLE IN THAT TERRITORY, UNLESS YOU HAVE A SPECIAL PLAYER. THE DIGITAL VERSION, HOWEVER, SEEMS A LITTLE MORE COMPLICATED.”



1. Buying a digital copy of a movie like *Cars* in one territory does not guarantee you access to the same title in another.

2. Harv’s calling with a reality check, but who is he going to sound like? That depends on where you live...



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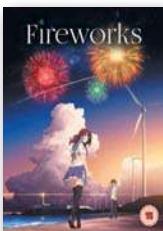
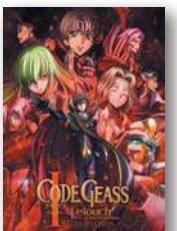
Out on 19 November



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mvm-films.com MVM_UK MVMEntertainment

UK release schedule



ANIME

| DATE | TITLE | DISTRIBUTOR |
|-------|--|---------------|
| 19/11 | When They Cry Series 1-3 [Collector's Blu-ray] | MVM |
| 19/11 | No Game No Life: Zero [DVD] | MVM |
| 19/11 | Naruto Shippuden Box 34 [DVD] | Manga |
| 19/11 | Junjo Romantica Season 2 [Blu-ray] | Anime Limited |
| 19/11 | Mobile Suit Gundam Thunderbolt: December Sky Limited Edition | Anime Limited |
| 26/11 | When They Cry: Kai S2 [DVD] | MVM |
| 26/11 | Code Geass -Lelouch of the Rebellion- Film 1 [Ltd Ed Blu-ray] | Anime Limited |
| 26/11 | Fireworks [Collector's Edition, DVD, Blu-ray] | Anime Limited |
| 26/11 | Love Live! Sunshine!! Season 1 [Blu-ray] | Anime Limited |
| 26/11 | March Comes in Like a Lion 1:2 [Collector's Blu-ray] | Anime Limited |
| 03/12 | Flip Flappers Collection [Blu-ray] | MVM |
| 03/12 | No Game No Life: Zero [Collector's Blu-ray] | MVM |
| 03/12 | Granblue Fantasy Part 2 [Blu-ray] | MVM |
| 03/12 | Sword Oratoria Collection [DVD, Blu-ray] | MVM |
| 03/12 | Digimon Adventure Tri 6 [DVD, Blu-ray] | Manga |
| 03/12 | Digimon Adventure Tri: Complete Movie Collection [DVD, Blu-ray] | Manga |
| 03/12 | Dragon Ball GT Seasons 1-2 [DVD] | Manga |
| 10/12 | Dragon Ball Kai: The Final Chapters Part 3 [DVD, Blu-ray] | Manga |
| 10/12 | Love, Chunibyo & Other Delusions! The Movie: Take On Me [DVD, Blu-ray] | Manga |
| 17/12 | When They Cry: Rei S3 [DVD] | MVM |
| 17/12 | One Piece [Uncut] Collection 20 [DVD] | Manga |
| 07/01 | Grimoire of Zero Collection [DVD, Blu-ray] | MVM |
| 14/01 | When They Cry Series 1 Collection [Blu-ray] | MVM |



MANGA

| DATE | TITLE | DISTRIBUTOR |
|-------|-------------------------------|-------------|
| 15/11 | Sailor Moon Eternal Edition 2 | Kodansha |
| 15/11 | LDK 12 | Kodansha |

| DATE | TITLE | DISTRIBUTOR |
|-------|--|-------------------------|
| 15/11 | Nekogahara: Stray Cat Samurai 5 | Kodansha |
| 15/11 | Land Of The Lustrous 7 | Kodansha |
| 15/11 | Waiting for Spring 9 | Kodansha |
| 15/11 | Golosseum 4 | Kodansha |
| 15/11 | Alita: Battle Angel Movie Tie-In Edition | Kodansha |
| 15/11 | Black Clover 13 | Shonen Jump |
| 15/11 | Black Torch 2 | Shonen Jump |
| 15/11 | Bleach 74 | Shonen Jump |
| 15/11 | Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba 3 | Shonen Jump |
| 15/11 | Dr. Stone Vol 2 | Shonen Jump |
| 15/11 | Dragon Ball: That Time I Got Reincarnated as Yamcha! | Shonen Jump |
| 15/11 | Fullmetal Alchemist: Fullmetal Edition 3 | VIZ Media |
| 15/11 | Haikyuu!! 29 | Shonen Jump |
| 15/11 | Jojo's Bizarre Adventure Part 3 Stardust Crusades 9 | VM Shonen Jump Advanced |
| 15/11 | Kaguya-sama: Love is War 5 | Shonen Jump |
| 15/11 | One Piece 88 | Shonen Jump |
| 22/11 | Sweetness and Lightning 11 | Kodansha |
| 22/11 | Welcome to the Ballroom 10 | Kodansha |
| 22/11 | UQ Holder 15 | Kodansha |
| 22/11 | Monogatari Series Box Set | Vertical |
| 27/11 | Katanagatari 1 | Vertical |
| 29/11 | Grand Blue Dreaming 3 | Kodansha |
| 29/11 | The Seven Deadly Sins 29 | Kodansha |
| 29/11 | Fullmetal Alchemist: The Complete Art Of | VIZ Media |
| 29/11 | RWBY Official Manga Anthology Vol 3 | VIZ Media |
| 06/12 | I Am Space Dandy 1 | Kodansha |
| 06/12 | Attack on Titan 26 | Kodansha |
| 06/12 | Attack on Titan: Before the Fall 15 | Kodansha |
| 06/12 | Kiss Me at the Stroke of Midnight 8 | Kodansha |
| 13/12 | Noragami: Stray God 19 | Kodansha |
| 13/12 | Again!! 6 | Kodansha |
| 13/12 | Descending Stories: Showa Gengoku Rakugo Shinju 10 | Kodansha |
| 13/12 | In/Spectre 9 | Kodansha |
| 13/12 | To Your Eternity 8 | Kodansha |



ASIAN FILM

| DATE | TITLE | DISTRIBUTOR |
|-------|---|-----------------------|
| 19/11 | Orgies Of Edo | Arrow Video |
| 19/11 | Zatoichi The Blind Swordsman Criterion Collection | Sony Pictures |
| 23/11 | Shoplifters | Thunderbird Releasing |
| 30/11 | Dead Souls | ICA Films |
| 10/12 | Dragon Fist | 88 Films |
| 10/12 | To Kill With Intrigue | 88 Films |
| 10/12 | Once Upon A Time In China Trilogy | Eureka |
| 14/12 | An Elephant Sitting Still | New Wave Films |
| 24/12 | Paradox | Universal Pictures |
| 01/01 | Spider Lillies | Parasol Pictures |
| 01/02 | Burning | Thunderbird Releasing |
| 06/02 | Alita: Battle Angel | 20th Century Fox |
| 24/02 | Sword Of The Assassin | Koch Media |

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WORDS BY DAVID WEST



PARADOX

Wilson Yip returns to the SPL series

BEFORE HE HELPED to make a modest kung fu teacher into a legend with the *Ip Man* movies, director Wilson Yip struck box office gold in 2005 with the action classic *SPL*, aka *Kill Zone*, starring Donnie Yen and Sammo Hung. Cheang Pou-Soi took the director's chair for 2015's brilliant *Kill Zone 2*, starring Wu Jing, Tony Jaa and Max Zhang, but now Yip returns to the helm for the third *SPL* movie, *Paradox*.

The three films don't share common characters or plot strands but instead they are united by their insanely good action scenes. For *Paradox*, Yip reunites with Sammo Hung who serves as action director as he did for the first two *Ip Man* films. Louis Koo stars as Hong Kong cop Lee Chung-Chi, whose teenage daughter Wing-Chi (Hanna Chan) is kidnapped while in Pattaya, Thailand. Understandably perturbed, Lee hops on a plane to the land of smiles, where he encounters local coppers Chui Kit (Wu Kue) and Tak (Tony Jaa), but the police department is rife with corruption and tracking down his daughter is going to require busting a lot of heads. Luckily, Tak is more than a little bit handy in that department.

The prospect of Thailand's top martial arts star Tony Jaa working with Hong Kong's greatest fight choreographer Sammo Hung should have action fans slavering in anticipation, while Louis Koo always delivers the goods as a leading man. *Paradox* is heading for DVD on 24 December, just in time for Christmas, from Universal Pictures.



BURNING

Smouldering with resentment

Based on a story by Haruki Murakami, Lee Chang-dong's award-winning drama *Burning* is coming to the UK. Jongsoo (Yoo Ah-In) is beguiled by Haemi (Jeon Jong-seo) when they meet in Seoul. She claims they went to high school together in his poor, rural hometown, but he has no memories of her. When she returns from a trip to Africa accompanied by a rich new boyfriend, Ben (Steven Yuen), Jongsoo is both jealous and envious. When Haemi disappears, Jongsoo suspects Ben is responsible, but has no proof of wrongdoing besides Ben's confession that he enjoys starting fires.

Lee's movie, which won Best Film at South Korea's Grand Bell Awards, addresses the ever-widening gap between the have and have-nots in Korea, embodied in the conflict between the two mismatched rivals for Haemi's affections. *Burning* is in cinemas 1 February from Thunderbird.



THE DEFINITIVE TALE

Fan Favourite JRPG Returns

It's been ten years since *Tales Of Vesperia* first arrived on the Xbox 360, but now the game is heading for contemporary consoles in a fresh, shiny Definitive Edition. The classic JRPG is being updated with features never previously available outside of Japan. These include a pair of new playable characters – the young pirate Patty Fleur and Imperial Knight Flynn Scifo – alongside HD graphics, bonus costumes, plus more boss battles and mini-games. Fans can opt for the Premium Edition containing four soundtrack CDs, an artbook, stickers, badges, and collectible cards all wrapped up in a steel case. *Tales Of Vesperia: Definitive Edition* will be released on the PlayStation 4, Nintendo Switch and PC via Steam on 11 January from Bandai Namco.



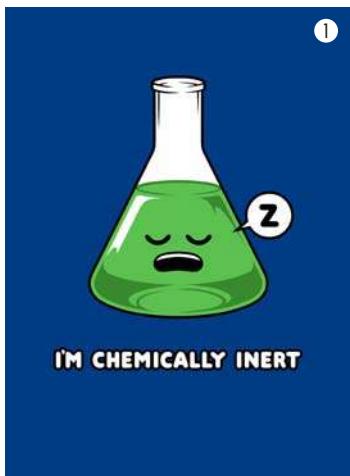
//COMING UP NELKE & THE LEGENDARY ALCHEMISTS

OUT: 2019 DISTRIBUTOR: KOEI TECMO

The *Atelier* series celebrates its 20th anniversary with the release of *Nelke & The Legendary Alchemists: Ateliers Of The New World* next year for the PS4, Switch and PC. Players take the role of Nelke, a young aristocrat responsible for developing the town of Westwald into a thriving hub for alchemy. Since Nelke isn't an alchemist herself, she'll need help from some famous faces from the *Atelier* franchise! Gameplay combines town management with turn-based combat as Nelke's alchemists gather resources.

WE LOVE THIS STUFF!

Check out NEO's pick of the coolest merchandise around this month



1. NEW GENKI GEAR DESIGNS

We love Genki Gear's cool £10 range, and you can get this Unfriendly Dice design in black for ladies and unisex sizes now at GenkiGear.com. Or, check out this Chemically Inert tee, £16 in ladies and unisex in a range of three colours!

2. CARDFIGHT!! VANGUARD ULTRARARE MIRACLE COLLECTION BOOSTER

Get your hands on the latest booster for just £3.99! Find out more about what's included at en.cf-vanguard.com/products/veb03, and purchase from your local friendly game shop: findyourgamestore.co.uk.

3. BAO BUN KITS

From School of Wok comes these amazing make at home kits so you can create your own fluffy bao buns! Available in barbecue and black pepper flavours from Lakeland and Tesco.

4. ITSU SWEET DESSERT DUMPLINGS

Japanese-inspired lunch chain itsu is taking its products to the supermarket, and their latest offering is a range of sweet gyoza dumplings, available in sweet berry, chocolate and banana, and caramelised apple dessert flavours! Available in Waitrose, Tesco and Ocado.

5. HATSUNE MIKU HALLOWEEN VERSION

It's never too early to start celebrating – get ready for Halloween 2019 with this premium figure from tokyotoys.com for £32!



O N S A L E



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| RRR | [Triple Rare] |
| RR | [Double Rare] |
| R | [Rare] |
| C | [Common] |

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|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|
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| OR | [Orion Rare] |
| URR | [Ultra Rare] |
| SCR | [Scarlet Rare] |
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crunchyroll
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ANIME EXPOSÉ

THE GIRL IN TWILIGHT

If *K-On!* went quantum



A NEW TV season's underway, and unsurprisingly many of the shows are familiar types. This year saw a new book, *Interpreting Anime* by Christopher Bolton, which cold-shoulders TV anime for that reason, arguing that they're given to "rigidly repeating formulas" (true enough) and don't deserve serious analysis like the best one-off anime for cinema and video. We reckon that's too dismissive. Formulas have their own pleasures, and the frothiest or crudest shows may do something interesting with them – though you may need to watch hundreds of shows over several decades to see the patterns emerge.

Over the page we look at *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime*, which is already doing something interesting with a template that looked hopelessly hackneyed. First, though, there's *Girl in Twilight*, which you could boil down to *Five Feisty Girls Go on an Adventure*. It's a parallel-world adventure, where the characters travel to alternative versions of our reality, fight battles and learn lessons. Plus there's an arc plot involving a multidimensional foe, and extra versions of some of the girls complicating things.

But it starts, like so many anime, with a humble school club. Asuka is its high-energy founder, an ever-optimistic girl who can wear a huge red ribbon on her head without shame and has dragged the other members of the Crystal Radio Club into an eccentric little ritual. Every day, at 4.44 in the afternoon precisely, Asuka and her fellow females – serious Yu, sweet Mia, foulmouthed delinquent Nana, and coolly detached Chloe – all gather at a sacred tree on a hillside above

their town. Here Asuka tunes their club radio to a hopeful-looking frequency, and they pray to be taken to another world.

Naturally, in the first scene they try this and nothing happens. Equally naturally, halfway through the episode they try again... and in the blink of an anime girl's saucer eye, they're in a golden desert surrounded by creatures who really aren't the cute bunnies they resemble. Luckily, another girl shows up to save the day – a girl who looks and sounds extraordinarily like Asuka, and is called Asuka, but has the diametrically different attitude of a humourless warrior. Call her Asuka-Mikasa.

This Asuka warns the group to go home and never come back again. Even so, she can't resist sampling the home comforts enjoyed by the "other" Asuka, who treats her newfound double as a long-lost twin. Despite the warning, soon the girls stumble into another parallel world, this one more similar to their own, and it doesn't happen by accident. For the alternate Asuka isn't the only otherworlder who's noticed the girls of the Crystal Radio Club...

OPEN VERDICT

It looks like a simple genre crossover; a cast of cute girls thrown into the kind of parallel-world plot that most readers with a passing interest in sci-fi will have encountered, whether in *Sliders* (remember that?), *Family Guy*, *Star Trek* or *Doctor Who*. In anime, *Steins;Gate* is an obvious precedent,



"IN SOME WAYS, THIS COMPARES FAVOURABLY TO THE FILM FIREWORKS BY SHAFT, ANOTHER PARALLEL-WORLD TALE WHICH OFTEN SEEMED TO BE TOLD FROM THE WRONG VIEWPOINT."



although the set-up in *Girl in Twilight* is closer to the 12-year-old *Noein*, which also has "ordinary" present-day kids being confronted by darker, more grown-up versions of themselves.

Based on the early episodes of *Girl in Twilight*, we'll have to record an open verdict. The chemistry between the girls is hardly Kyoto Animation level; there are moments of blatant fanservice that KyoAni would never do; and patches of extreme silliness that spoil rather than enhance the fun. But it has deftly planted some mysteries, such as a missing kid brother who's sought by both Asukas, and at times it's rather affecting.

In particular, the second alternate world that the girls visit turns out to be a Japan with different ideas about marriage, treading on similar territory to *Love and Lies*. But the plotline lets Nana, the group's self-declared delinquent, act out in unexplored directions, and realize some important things about herself while doing

so. In some ways, this compares favourably to the film *Fireworks* by the Shaft studio, another parallel-world tale which often seemed to be told from the wrong viewpoint.

The main character in *Fireworks* was a boy, but the film also featured a troubled girl who could have reacted to the timeloop plot in a much more interesting way... but she was kept oblivious to it instead. By comparison, the way that *Girl in Twilight* lets Nana discover her own truths is a marked improvement.

That, at least, is a sympathetic way to look at it. You can also see the Nana / marriage storyline as collapsing into another depressing set of clichés; the way that Nana finally comes into her own feels awfully close to a famous game-anime franchise. This column, though, tries to treat new shows kindly whenever it can. But we won't oversell them – on the evidence so far, we don't think *Girl in Twilight* will ever be a patch on the excellent *Noein*. ●

ALSO STREAMING...



SWORD ART ONLINE: ALICIZATION

The next *Attack on Titan* episodes aren't due till spring, cuing outraged shouts of "GET ON WITH IT!" from elderly *Titan* fans waving sticks from their bath chairs. Anyway, this means a lot of fan attention should switch to the new incarnation of SAO. Reported to run around 50 episodes, the series chronicles the further adventures of Kirito, based on the later canonical light novels by Reki Kawahara. The first episodes can be described uncontroversially as slow, which means, naturally, more howls of "GET ON WITH IT!".



SSSS.GRIDMAN

It's mecha and it's Trigger, as in Studio Trigger, purveyors of *Kill la Kill* and last winter's mecha entry *Darling in the Franxx*. But *SSSS.Gridman* has also been promoted as a new take on Japan's so-called *tokusatsu* genre of effects-based live-action films and series; think *Ultraman* and *Power Rangers*. The story is a twisty-seeming affair that involves the usual battles between giant heroes and monsters, but also a world of memory losses and resets. Could it be another *Samurai Flamenco*?



RADIANT

Here's a show to ignite arguments about "But is it *really* anime?". Oh, it's Japan-animated and it follows the *Shonen Jump*-y template, about a feisty boy hero – he's an apprentice sorcerer – who's out to fight monsters and find glory. However, *Radiant* is actually based on a French comic. Given the recent cinema release of the rather bloodier *MFKZ*, another French-Japanese crossover, maybe we're in for a wave of Gallic-inspired anime. If so, count us in – we'd love to see an anime *Asterix*.

ANIME EXPOSÉ

THAT TIME I GOT REINCARNATED AS A SLIME

Rise of the Ooze



ADMIT IT, THAT'S a great grabber of a title at the top of the page. The first time you see it, your reaction is probably "What?!" followed by "No, I promised myself I wouldn't be surprised by anything that came out of Japan after *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure* / *Penguindrum* / *Keijo* / *Uma Musume* / all of the above." And your next thought after that may be, "But how can they make a series out of this? I mean, the hero's a *slime*?"

Indeed he is. We meet him briefly in his human form in the anime's opening minutes, where he's an unremarkable 37-year-old Tokyo salaryman named Satoru. By the standards of anime everymen, he looks like rakish centrefold material, though he's never had a girlfriend, and he reflects ruefully that his virginity qualifies him as a wizard (if you're baffled by the reference, it's an old internet meme).

As you could guess from the show's name, Satoru's about to die. But whereas you might expect him to die in some jokey way, like the heroes of *Konosuba* and *In Another World With My Smartphone*, Satoru's death scene is almost entirely straight. He meets his company junior and a female acquaintance outside their workplace for lunch when a goon comes out of nowhere, wielding a massive knife. Satoru shoves the younger man out of the way – unlike *Konosuba*, there's no question he saved a life – and gets skewered himself. Remember, in Japan, knives are feared far more than guns.

Satoru has no chance, bleeding out profusely on the pavement while his colleagues look on in horror. Okay, there is a good joke in Satoru's last request to his junior, relating to single men and posthumous embarrassments. Then

he dies, and the next few minutes are... Well, they're rather wonderfully weird. They'll remind older anime fans of the ultra-trippy end to the original TV *Evangelion*, but it'll remind *more* viewers of the bit at the start of a computer RPG where you create a new character, setting his or her attributes for the epic adventure...

And just like that, Satoru is reincarnated as a blob of slime, in a deep dark dank cave in a fantasy world. Again, it's partly a joke for gamers; the slime was the bottom-level monster in the original iconic *Dragon Quest* RPG from the 1980s. To amplify the point, the background music and sound effects in these scenes sound *exactly* like a vintage 8-bit videogame. How fitting that the anime is made by a studio that's actually called 8-Bit!

Gaming fans will also know the *Dragon Quest* slime evolved immensely over the franchise, spawning numerous mutations (friendly slimes, Big Boss slimes) and eventually becoming the most popular species of the franchise. There's a metaphor for evolution that Richard Dawkins would applaud. In much the same way, Satoru finds that being a slime is no idle ooze; he's upwardly mobile beyond any salaryman's dream. Today the puddle, tomorrow the world...

DRAGON'S DEN

Many NEO readers will already know much of what's in store for Satoru, or Rimuru as he's soon renamed. (In this show, names and the act of giving something a name are big deal.) As a franchise, *Slime* has already climbed the evolutionary ladder itself, starting as an online novel like *Overlord* and *Sword*



Art Online, before being turned into print and manga form. As of writing, there are eight manga books available and three print ones, so fast readers will be well ahead in Satoru's – okay, Rimuru's – adventures.

Just in the anime, we've seen him meet a pouty Smaug dragon type – a comic highlight, with both non-human creatures revealing all kinds of humanity – and then spending a long time “leveling up” his powers most entertainingly. Before long, our hero slime can fight, talk, absorb abilities, and shapeshift, and we'd lay our money on him versus Conan the Barbarian any day. Finally Rimuru flops into the sunlight, and into a very game-style world of dwarves and goblins, fights and sorcery, but also strategy and management skills. Those are things a former Tokyo salaryman knows from real life, not just RPG algorithms, as Rimuru starts to intervene in this world in earnest.

So far, *Slime* is looking jolly good. It's no surprise that Rimuru makes a cute slime, and he's also stretchily, bouncily, cartoonishly expressive – and of course slime expressions look funny just by *being* slime expressions. The show's opening credits have already given away a spoiler, that Rimuru will take on human form – indeed, that may have happened by the time you read this. However, his sticky-ball self is so well established in the first episodes that he surely won't forget his primordial nature.

Slime is great fun, though it could get heavy – the opening stabbing wasn't soft-coated, while a mysterious prologue set in wartime Japan evokes *Grave of the Fireflies*. Evolution can go in so many different ways... ●

Slime Girls!

Anime says slime can be sexy. Let's face it, *anything* can be sexy in anime, but the medium makes make a good case for the goop. Suu in the racy comedy *Monster Musume* often appears as a cute blue girl, but she can return to her basic slime form to slide sensually into tiny cracks and crannies. As for the slime girl Melona in the *Queen's Blade* franchise, her name gives a clue about how she manipulates her assets.

Slime Guys!

Animation was playing with slime back in 1992, in the Aussie kids' film, *Ferngully: The Last Rainforest*. It's an eco-fantasy where the villain, Hexxus, is technically a *sludge* monster, but he still slings slime about a lot. If you're not inclined to see a children's cartoon, then consider that Hexxus is voiced by the legendary Tim Curry, star of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and the definitive sweet transvestite from transsexual Transylvania. YouTube “fernngully toxic love” to see Hexxus in his oozing glory.

1. An enigmatic girl glimpsed at the start of the series. 2. With great power comes... you know the rest. 3. A slime's best friend is his direwolf!



SLIME TENTACLES!

Made in 1968, *The Green Slime* is an early Japan / US hybrid (American actors, Japanese filmmakers). It's a live-action sci-fi adventure involving a spaceship overrun by tentacled slime monsters (no, not *that* kind of tentacle monster). Despite its laughable effects, the film does have a big point of interest for NEO readers. The film's director was Kinji Fukasaku, who would go on to the celebrated *Battles Without Honour and Humanity*, and whose last film would be the unforgettable *Battle Royale*.

REGENERATING RURAL JAPAN

Mark Guthrie seeks out the young Japanese who are turning their backs on the city to bring the countryside back to its natural glory.

When Atsuro Tatematsu was a kid, he had two dreams: to become an aircraft engineer, and an architect. While he has succeeded in his first, working for Mitsubishi in its aeronautics division, it is the pursuit of the latter that puts him on the vanguard of a new breed of young Japanese rediscovering their rural roots.

Atsuro grew up amongst the skyscrapers of Nagoya, Japan's fourth largest city, but it was a chance trip to the countryside that rekindled a childhood desire that would change his life.

"About ten years ago I visited Miyama, a small town in the hills of Kyoto, and I was overcome by the beautiful buildings in the area. These were nothing like the high-rises of the city centre, or the flat-pack-style homes of the suburbs, but magnificent, traditional buildings with huge thatched roofs," Atsuro recalls.

"I had to know how they were made, so I joined a thatching workshop where I met thatchers Makoto and Minoru, who let me up onto a roof and feel the thatch for myself. It was a fantastic, unforgettable moment for me. It was like an epiphany."

THE REBIRTH OF A DYING SKILL

Makoto Nakano has lived most of his life in Miyama. In the late '80s, when Japan's affluent 'bubble' period was at its height and his friends were heading to the big city for high salaries and to live the high-life, he found himself at an existential crossroads.

During a trip to the UK he had visited the small Bedfordshire village of Mursley, where he came across beautiful thatched roofed cottages. It was a revelation for him to see that these old buildings were held in such esteem by their wealthy owners while in Japan they were steeped in the stigma of the past, in direct opposition to the drive towards modernity that typified 1980s Japan.

Makoto returned to Miyama as 'a man with a mission': to leave behind his highly-paid job and learn thatching to not only reinvigorate his village, but to return a pride to their rural roots. When he told his grandmother of this plan she broke down in tears. Why did he want to take on this low-

class role, bringing shame on his family? Yet he was unperturbed, and now the village of Miyama is renowned for its traditional thatched buildings, bringing thousands of tourists each year, and he has trained more than ten qualified thatchers around the country, breathing new life into a skill that had been lost almost entirely.

BRINGING THE COMMUNITY TOGETHER

When he was a child, each February Atsuro would accompany his father on trips to the small village of Iwamura, nestled at the foot of the Central Japanese Alps mountain range. Here his father, a great sake enthusiast, would enjoy the local brewery's new batch, and Atsuro would marvel at the local trains and the stunning countryside.

Unfortunately, Atsuro's father passed away while he was still in high school, but when he came of age and grew a taste for sake himself, Atsuro returned to Iwamura. On one of these visits, when driving around the village's outskirts, he came across an old building. It was dilapidated, rundown, and the thatched roof leaked, but Atsuro immediately understood its potential. He contacted the owner, and the pair, with the backing of friends and the city council, sourced the funds to repair the old building. From there, the only problem was finding the professionals to complete the reconstruction.

"Traditional carpentry and thatching are dying arts," Atsuro explains. "Though I wanted to utilise solely local talent for this community project, I eventually called in Minoru and he was able, when removing the old thatch, to figure out how it was originally put together."

It was not only Minoru that helped to rebuild the old house, but the local community came together with people of all ages learning the traditional handicrafts required to rebuild the house in its original form.

Important to this was the concept of 'yui', or cooperation. Historically Japanese homes were maintained by the community as a whole; Atsuro felt that for the redevelopment to achieve its aims, it was necessary for everyone to be involved, drawing people away from the insular pastimes of television, videogames and modern distractions to work together to create >>>

"I WANT TO CREATE A SOLUTION THAT KEEPS OUR TRADITION ALIVE, AND FOR JAPANESE PEOPLE TO REASSESS THE VALUE OF THEIR HOMES BEFORE BUYING FLAT-PACKED HOUSES THAT ARE ENVIRONMENTALLY UNFRIENDLY AND NOT BUILT TO LAST." ATSURO TATEMATSU





1. Not small, these cottages.
2. Creating these thatches takes time and skill. 3. All smiles from the team! 4. The next generation of traditional carpenter plying his trade. 5. Learning how to make support beams is interesting stuff. 6. A thatched roof in Miyama starts to take shape. The slope is steep to withstand the heavy winter snow.



REGENERATING RURAL JAPAN

All images by Atsuro Tatematsu with permission



"DURING A TRIP TO THE UK HE HAD VISITED THE SMALL BEDFORDSHIRE VILLAGE OF MURSLEY, WHERE HE CAME ACROSS BEAUTIFUL THATCHED ROOFED COTTAGES. IT WAS A REVELATION FOR HIM TO SEE THAT THESE OLD BUILDINGS WERE HELD IN SUCH ESTEEM BY THEIR WEALTHY OWNERS WHILE IN JAPAN THEY WERE STEEPED IN THE STIGMA OF THE PAST, IN DIRECT OPPOSITION TO THE DRIVE TOWARDS MODERNITY THAT TYPIFIED 1980S JAPAN."

>>> something tangible that now stands as a focal point and centrepiece of the old town about which they can all be proud.

THE COMMUNITY COMING TOGETHER AGAIN

Yutaka Murakami has lived in Yamaoka, a small *kanten* seaweed farming village to the west of Iwamura, since he was a small child. His father, like Makoto, had eschewed the prosperity of the bubble years and, longing for a simpler, healthier life, left their home in the city to relocate to the countryside. Since then, however, the thatched cottage in which they lived had fallen into disrepair. But then, one day, Makoto saw Atsuro at work in Iwamura.

"He asked me if I could help him with his own renovation. I told him that the susuki silver grass to roof the house alone would cost a lot of money. He thanked me for my time and then left," Atsuro remembers. "Then, eight years later I bumped into him quite coincidentally. He told me that in that time he had been growing and cultivating the susuki himself, and had 2,000 bundles of it, enough for the thatch. I was very surprised, but even more impressed."

So impressed was Atsuro that he has once again rallied together the local community and friends from the city, to help rebuild this 160-year-old cottage, and the process has begun once more. This time, however, the

cottage is to be redeveloped as a space for young children to engage with nature, with the aim of fostering a love for traditional Japanese customs within the next generation, and the one after that.

A DREAM BECOMING REALITY

Through these community projects Atsuro too has changed his outlook on life. Whereas previously architecture was a dream and thatching a hobby, he is currently in the process of qualifying to become a traditional architect.

"These old houses require a lot of skill, a lot of effort and qualified professionals, which is a problem. In addition, thanks to modern regulations, few architects are able to design houses in the traditional Japanese style. I want to create a solution that keeps our tradition alive, and for Japanese people to reassess the value of their homes before buying flat-packed houses that are environmentally unfriendly and not built to last," says Atsuro.

"More than anything I would love to see traditional homes with thatched roofs amongst the skyscrapers of the city. Who knows? We could even make English-style pubs serving sake and beer! That is my new dream, and it will take a lot of work to persuade people."

Don't bet against him achieving it.

If you are interested in the rural regeneration happening in Japan, why not check out what Atsuro and his friends are doing at iezukuri.strikingly.com? ●



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[ANIME REVIEW]

FIREWORKS

Best viewed from the front

26 NOVEMBER // ANIME LIMITED // 12 // ROMANCE // £17.99 (DVD),
£19.99 (BLU-RAY), £34.99 (COLLECTOR'S BLU-RAY/DVD) // 90 MINS //

PLOT School friends Norimichi and Yusuke are both smitten with their classmate Nazuna. But when a mysterious object gives Norimichi the chance to step back in time and redo previous events, he's able to whisk Nazuna away from her troubles on an adventure against a festival skyline lit by fireworks.

Fireworks, or to use its full name of *Fireworks, Should We See it from the Side or the Bottom?*, begs to ask a question that you've probably never even thought about before. When we watch fireworks, just what angle are we seeing them from? It's an ongoing question that's peppered throughout the film, not only working to humorous effect but also surreal enough that you'll quickly find yourself questioning the idea just by matter of osmosis.

However there is a purpose to this rather odd question, working as an important thematic parallel to the film's ideas when it comes to time travel. *Fireworks* is a film that's less about the act of time travel itself (making only a handful of leaps into the past that cover a mere few hours at the most), and more about the opportunities it presents. Knowledge of how events play out give Norimichi the ability to try

again with a new perspective, much like how a different perspective on fireworks can seemingly radically change the way we view them. It's a rather long-winded metaphor to say the least, but as a running theme throughout the film gives a little more depth than you may perceive from just the question itself.

The strange thing is though, if you were to begin watching *Fireworks* without the slightest idea of what it was about, then a dose of sci-fi fantasy would probably be the last thing you'd be expecting. The film's fairly low key opening instead focuses on its slice of life elements, establishing the friendship between Norimichi and Yusuke as well as their romantic rivalry when it comes the affections of the seemingly aloof Nazuna. This early section does a particularly good job of building up a basic love triangle between the characters.

Following this Yusuke quickly falls into the background, as the only real focal point when it comes to characters here is the time Norimichi and Nazuna spend together. With Norimichi starting out as shy and awkward and Nazuna something of a manic pixie dream girl, they don't have a whole lot to go off when it comes to personality, but the dynamic between them is what manages to make them remarkable. He becomes more confident and assertive, as she's able to gradually let go of her troubles and be the person she wants to be. There's nothing particularly complex about any of it, but the emotions are strong enough to keep the story compelling.

ADAPTATION

Fireworks is an adaptation of an award-winning 1993 television drama film of the same name by Shunji Iwai. The drama was later released in Japanese cinemas in 1995.



The fact that it's so easy to get sucked into the realism of *Fireworks*' setting is what makes the sudden appearance of time travel all the more surprising, though the surprise itself might be a little easier to swallow if the execution didn't feel so half-baked. With next to no explanation as to what the mysterious object that causes this phenomenon is, compounded by an even more perplexing visual representation at the film's climax, anyone expecting

"*FIREWORKS* TAKES MORE PRIDE IN WHAT ITS JOURNEY HAS TO OFFER, RATHER THAN THE SPECIFICS OF JUST HOW IT GOES ABOUT IT."

logic might find themselves disappointed. *Fireworks* takes more pride in what its journey has to offer, rather than the specifics of just how it goes about it.

So instead what follows isn't a high-stakes scenario for the runaway couple, but something that every teenage romantic will have dreamt about at one stage – the opportunity to spend just one night with the girl they've fallen for. There's never anything especially extravagant about the time Norimichi and Nazuna spend together, that instead comes from the escapism that they find in each

other. Some sequences are told through fantastical visuals, but the heart lies in them learning about each other as they avoid both Norimichi's friends and Nazuna's parents whilst planning their next move. Even if it doesn't manage to take you back to your childhood, there still manages to be something thoroughly relatable about the whole situation.

But much like its namesake, *Fireworks* is a film that prioritises spectacle. Animated by studio Shaft as well as co-directed by *Bakemonogatari* and *Madoka Magica* maestro Akiyuki Shinbou, *Fireworks* is a film completely confident in its production staff and values. From the rich, detailed scenery to the memorable character designs, there isn't a visual element that has gone forgotten. As if it were testing itself, each set piece manages to look more beautiful than the last – culminating in a finale that combines 2D and CG animation that truly takes *Fireworks* into the realms of the fantastical.

Of course, Shaft fans can look forward to all those staple sequences that have helped make the studio so beloved over the years, such as winding spiral staircases and the obligatory "Shaft head tilt".

Although *Fireworks*' sci-fi element often seems muddled and underdeveloped, the film remains a charming and fantastical tale of young romance. As well as tackling the concept of choice and perspective through the most curious of metaphors, Shaft deliver a visual spectacle that lives up to the studio's high benchmark. ●

✿✿✿✿

KEY TALENT

Fireworks' lead trio are played by high profile Japanese actors Suzu Hirose (Nazuna) and Masaki Suda (Norimichi), along with voice actor legend Mamoru Miyano (Yusuke) – *Death Note's* Light Yagami and much much more!

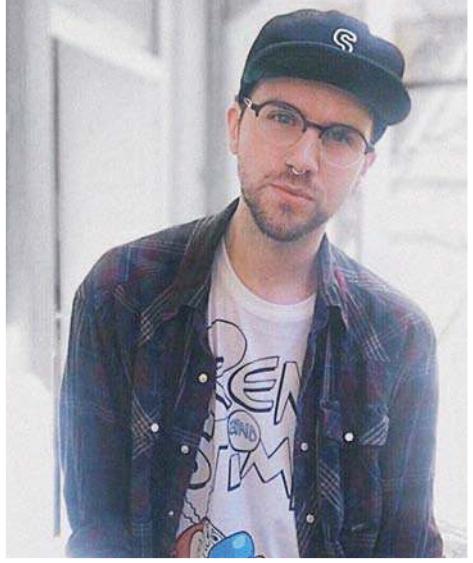
WHAT IS KAWAII?

'Kawaii' (or かわいい) is the Japanese word for 'cute', 'lovable' or 'adorable' that now seems to sum up a whole sub-culture. Think cutesy cartoon characters, rainbow coloured fashion, and the playful shopping streets of Harajuku, Tokyo. It's become much more than just an aesthetic though; kawaii culture sprinkles a little magic into our lives, sparks positivity, and gives us a chance to get our creativity flowing. And it's not just in Japan that kawaii culture has a cult following; here in the UK we've embraced it with open arms! We caught up with six people from up and down the country, all with a passion for kawaii, to find out how Japan's culture of cute has influenced their personal and professional lives.

For more
about Lizzie's
looks, turn to
page 041!

UK KAWAII

Emily Valentine takes a tour around the UK to find six people who have embraced the Japanese ideal of cute as a way of life!



DANNY

I've been a fan of kawaii characters for most of my life. As a kid, watching *Sailor Moon* got me into anime and this encouraged me to learn more about Japanese pop culture and 'kawaii' brands. I was 19 when I first visited Tokyo and every time I visit my collection just keeps growing. I think kawaii is just an aspect of who I am now, it's something very much engrained into my interests and personality. I'm into things that make me feel nostalgic so love characters from the early 2000s. I enjoy collecting vintage San-x characters (like Afro Ken and Kogepan) but also love Sumikko Gurashi. Badtz Maru and Keroppi are my favourite Sanrio characters and I'm really into Yuru-Chara too. Chiitan is my current favourite. My fashion style is probably on the grungy side of kawaii, but there's usually always a cute character somewhere on my outfit.

One of my favourite anime series this year has been *Sanrio Danshi*, I think it did a great job of breaking gender stereotypes. As a guy, it can be a difficult hobby to explain to people outside of the fandom. Society and the media often label cute things as 'feminine' or purely aimed at women. I think gender stereotypes can be quite damaging, and think for these perceptions to change it's important that there's representation and a welcoming attitude within any fandom for everyone regardless of gender, sexuality, race or religion.

@whimsicalboy

ELLA GOODWIN

My first venture into kawaii was whilst staying at a friend's house as a child. She had a Japanese mother and would always have colourful, super cute stationery illustrated with smiling characters. I had serious envy! Later on I discovered the *FRUITS* books and an interest became an obsession. I studied animation and chose to write my dissertation on Japanese youth culture entitled 'The Plagiarisers become the Plagiarised'. I was fascinated with the constant swapping of cultures and fashions. These were often inspired by something I was already familiar with, but the kawaii kids of Tokyo would put such an original and exciting twist on it. I went to Japan in 2003 as part of my research (basically an excuse to go) and spent 10 days in Tokyo and Hakone sucking it all up, guzzling up five storey fabric shops and tentatively wandering the streets of Harajuku on my own. I was also lucky enough to see the Super Flat exhibition in Roppongi which spawned a new obsession with Takeshi Murakami and also Chiho Aoshima (whose work I have tattooed down my arm). Since then I have been back three more times and go back again in May 2019. My work is inspired by kawaii, Japanese folklore and cats (and other creatures). It has a light-hearted aesthetic based on the way that kawaii makes me feel; you can so easily jump into a different, softer world that you can really immerse yourself in.

@missellaillustrator

Emily Valentine photography.



RACHEL

Growing up I was really into kawaii characters Hello Kitty and Gloomy Bear. I then discovered lolita fashion (an elegant, feminine alternative Japanese fashion style) and my interest in other alternative Japanese fashion and Tokyo street styles grew. I found my favourite sub-style called 'Fairy Kei' which allowed me to feel more like myself, and be more creative with outfits. I knew it was the style for me. Now almost everything I own is cute and colourful!

Wearing cute clothes and being surrounded by all things kawaii truly brings me joy. I've also met some amazing people through Harajuku fashion events and meet-ups in the UK, and have become close friends with some.

Highlights include meeting Sebastian Masuda (designer of fashion brand 6% DOKIDOKI) and Haruka Kurebayashi (Harajuku fashion model). I've also learnt lots about Japan through kawaii; the food, traditional culture, and pop culture. And fashion of course! Through my YouTube videos I try and use my knowledge and experience to help people out; my most popular video being 'Fairy Kei for Beginners'. I'm a strong believer that kawaii culture and fashion is for everyone, and anyone! It doesn't matter what age, gender, race, religion etc. you are, as long as it brings you joy, that's all that matters.

 @pastelhorror



ROXIE SWEETHEART

I was first introduced to Japanese street fashion and 'kawaii' from the book *FRUIT* and Gwen Stefani's album *Love. Angel. Music. Baby*. The vibrancy, whimsicality and sheer (sometimes twisted) cuteness of Japanese art, design and fashion has always inspired me. Japanese design is unafraid to explore colour, texture and innovative ideas. I initially created the concept of 'Roxie Sweetheart' when I was studying Fashion and Textiles Enterprise at university, and my brand and personal style has really developed since then. I take inspiration from so many sources including Harajuku fashion and vintage children's toys – specifically from my own childhood nostalgia (My Little Pony, Polly Pocket and Care Bears) and more recently from the world of drag. I've always been a highly creative and artistic person who needed a constant outlet and freedom to express myself. So having my own brand was definitely the way forward. I've come to the point where I don't think there is much of a line between whether my brand influences my style or vice versa! Day to day I'd say my fashion is much more 'toned down', but most of my wardrobe pieces are still pretty OTT in comparison to most people's clothing I guess. I still like to make an effort every day because feeling 'kawaii' and unique gives me more confidence.

 @roxiesweetheart





LIZZIE

"In order to be noticed, you have to be different." Hands up if you've ever heard of something similar to this before? No matter what you do in life, there's this overwhelming pressure that you've got to be over-the-top in order to be noticed. When I first fell in love with Hello Kitty and kawaii fashion (through tumblr, no less) I thought I had to collect every Hello Kitty related item in existence in order to elevate my "kawaii status". A similar thing happened when I found out about gyaru fashion and I did my absolute best to stand out. I followed all of the tutorials, bought the most over-the-top clothes, and even though my bank balance suffered, I was happy. Years later, I started to tone down my style. Call it the adult life, but I just couldn't keep being incredibly dramatic in my style anymore. As soon as I ditched my agejo gyaru style for something more comfortable, I felt as if I was fading into the background. I was, as some would call it, starting to look "normal". It took me a while, but I realised that the most important thing was that I was enjoying the clothes I wear, and not forcing myself to go over-the-top just so that I can be accepted by the J-fashion community. Just because I was toning down didn't mean that I loved Japanese fashion and kawaii any less, I just had a different way of showing it.

@hellolizziebee

SANTI STORM

When I first visited Tokyo at 19 I spent hours wandering the magical streets of Harajuku. I knew it was a world I needed to be a part of, and a style I wanted to use to inspire my creativity, looks and performances as a London club kid, performer, host, and gogo boy. Working across clubs and venues all over the city and the world, this style has helped me to stand out and be unique.

Everything I wear and do is inspired by Japanese kawaii culture. I've always wanted to create a fantasy that expresses over the top cuteness with a London edge to it. It makes me feel adorable yet fierce, beautiful but untouchable. I also hope to radiate those feelings on to anyone that comes across me; Santi Storm, London's most kawaii club kid! I stick as many gems as possible on my face, wear bows in my hair and always try and involve some sort of cutesy character into my looks. Despite my adorable appearance kawaii culture makes me feel powerful. I want to show that femininity and cuteness doesn't mean weakness but actually means the opposite! Being a feminine kawaii cute boy shows strength and is something to be proud of.

@santistorm

Visit all our kawaii kids online at Instagram using their handles at the end of each section!





1

COSPLAY QUEEN

NEO's Andrew Osmond speaks to dedicated Japanese cosplayer Hikari Green – who has cosplayed all around the world – about cosplay life and cosplay culture in Japan and globally.

Here, in her own words, is her story!

17 YEARS AGO, I was a school student and there was a big reason why I started cosplay. I was bullied in my school because I had a medical condition. Other students, mainly male, bullied me – *"You are virus, we don't want to touch you, we don't want to talk with you."* I was so hurt. I didn't have a place in the school, I couldn't feel comfortable there or be myself.

I was so happy to read manga or watch anime because I can take a trip to another world. And one day I went to a really small cosplay event in Tokyo. I felt so scared because my self-esteem was so low. *"I'm not pretty, I'm not even normal,"* that was my self-image. At the event, there were so many beautiful cosplayers... I was walking around and two beautiful Vietnamese cosplayers came over to me and told me, *"You are so pretty, can I take your picture?"* It was a huge surprise; I felt that my world was breaking up! *You are beautiful, but you say I'm pretty?*

And then my obsession began and I thought, *I can be pretty, I want to change myself, I want to make an effort, I would really like to be them* [the Vietnamese cosplayers]. In the next five years, I met other people who were also obsessed with cosplay, people who were bullied, who didn't have a place to talk. Instead, they found their place in cosplay. I want to help such people to find themselves. Sometimes I'm asked, *"You are too old to be cosplaying, why are you doing this?"* Sometimes I feel scared – of course I'm human – but I want to behave like I am proud of doing that.

CREATING THE COSTUMES

For me, I make my costumes by myself, hundreds of them. It's really good to understand myself more; only I know which fabrics are most suitable for me. Making costumes has got faster and faster. I can make a complete costume in one

day, from top to bottom.

The most complicated costumes take me three or four days to make, and they use many more fabrics than the simple ones. Ten years ago, I cosplayed Ky Kiske in the *Guilty Gear* game and had to prepare six or seven metres of white cloth, and a big sword. My mother was asking, *"What's that?"* (laughs). For the sword, I bought a plastic board and carved and shaped it, then used a colour spray and steel wire...

Today cosplay is really open in Japan, but ten years ago it was really hard to get fabric or get a wig. Cosplayers like me had to keep what they did secret from society and their parents. They had a really hard time just making a costume, it was a big deal. Mainly I make male costumes, but sometimes I do female characters. My Kiki costume looks simple and the dress is a one-piece, of course, but I also made the bag, and it was very hard to make the hair-ribbon stand properly, and cut the wig to the right length.

I thought it was more difficult to express myself in male costumes, so I wanted to make them. I've seen many photobooks, and many photo-shoots around the world, and if I find an impressive photo, I think a lot about why it's good, why the cosplayers' expressions are good, and I want to take some essence from them. I have to find what are the best points in my body and face and show them up the most. But on the other hand, I don't need to hide my bad points. Five years ago, I worried about my face being circular, but now I think, *my face is circular, that's that*, so there's no need to hide it.

COSPLAYING ABROAD

Before cosplaying abroad, I was already a backpacker. I've been to over 50 countries by myself, like Russia, Israel, Alaska, Syria... I'm a person who doesn't



2



3



1. Cosplay of Mami from *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*. 2. Kiki from *Kiki's Delivery Service*. 3. Hikari as America from *Hetalia*.

PEOPLE LIKE TO SAY, "I'M OTAKU!" THEY WANT TO SAY, *I AM SOMETHING SPECIAL, I'M SO DIFFERENT FROM YOU*. IF I SAID I WAS AN OTAKU 20 YEARS AGO, PEOPLE WOULD SAY, "ARE YOU OKAY? DO YOU HAVE A PROBLEM IN YOUR PRIVATE LIFE?"

want to do the same things as other people. And I thought all the world is the same, people are the same.

Ten years ago, I went to a cosplay event in Thailand. Even then, Japanese people were more concerned about whether an outfit was *kawaii* and beautiful. They weren't so interested in the effort that had been spent on the costume or expression, but on the cosplayer's face and body. Sometimes that meant that people would aim for an external measure of beauty, not to be themselves. I feel a little disgusted about that, because for me cosplay is self-expression, to feel more comfortable and happy for yourself. In Japan, some people say "*I'm more kawaii, so I'm more than you*," or something like that.

But in Thailand, people were just enjoying the event, being happy wearing their costumes. If they find someone who wears a costume from the same manga or anime, they speak to each other and become friends. I really liked that.

At that time, *Hetalia* was popular – I was crazy for *Hetalia* myself, posting my *Hetalia* cosplays on the Deviant Art website, and because *Hetalia* was famous all over the world, that meant my photos spread round the world too.

I've now been to cosplay events in Germany, France, Spain, mainland

China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and the Netherlands. At a United States convention, people were just enjoying having an exciting time; it was like a party. Conventions in Europe are more into self-expression, making their own costumes in detail.

COSPLAY COMMUNITY

I know that in other countries, people can go to the convention site already in costume. But in Japan, it is frowned upon... [Japanese events announce that attendees should not arrive in costume.] Cosplayers themselves will photograph any cosplayers they see breaking the rules, and post the picture online. The cosplay community will get angry, because the rulebreakers are hurting their reputation.

The cosplay community has evolved and is getting bigger every year. Right now, I think there are two kinds of cosplayers. One kind are the cosplayers who want to be idols, they want to get more followers, more fame. They really like cosplaying *Love Live!*, where you can "be" an idol in a pretty costume.

On the other hand, there are the cosplayers who really want to express the anime or manga that they love in their own way. They don't choose the anime or manga because of the costume, but because of how good it is. >>>



"IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS, I MET OTHER PEOPLE WHO WERE ALSO OBSESSED WITH COSPLAY, PEOPLE WHO WERE BULLIED, WHO DIDN'T HAVE A PLACE TO TALK. INSTEAD, THEY FOUND THEIR PLACE IN COSPLAY."

4. Izumi Sena from *Ensemble Stars*. **5.** It's MEIKO of Vocaloid fame! **6.** A portrait of Hikari as herself! **7.** *Hetalia*'s America, enjoying some refreshments!

>>> BIG IN JAPANESE COSPLAY

Fate is famous for cosplayers... There are many *fujoshi* fans who like putting characters into couples, so *Hetalia* is popular for cosplayers. If I cosplay UK (the character) and my friend cosplays US, we can get photos of us as a couple and it's great fun (laughs).

Then there are people cosplaying as mascot characters from commercials to make people laugh. Disney princesses are popular in Japanese cosplay – Sleeping Beauty, Little Mermaid... Many Disney cosplayers rush to the Halloween cosplay events at Tokyo Disneyland. Of the "original" character cosplays, Goth Lolita is popular – cosplay and Gothic Lolita are really close. *Visual kei* cosplay is big too.

A NEW TREND

In Japan, otaku is a kind of fashion right now. People like to say, "I'm otaku!" They want to say, *I am something special, I'm so different from you*. If I said I was an otaku 20 years ago, people would say, "Are you okay? Do you have a problem in your private life?" (laughs)

I've been asked so many times why otaku became a fashion in Japan. In my opinion, *dojinshi* (amateur Japanese manga) was a factor. Some people think otaku must make big money. There's Comiket (the huge three-day *dojinshi* event in Tokyo in

summer and winter), which draws hundreds of thousands of people. Some business people think, *Oh, otaku make money!* and they focus on the otaku market... Moreover, cosplay is international, and international is a word that Japanese people really like. *I'm international...*

WHY HALLOWEEN ISN'T REALLY A "COSPLAY" EVENT IN JAPAN

Many people asked me, *Are you going to Halloween?*, implying that because I'm a cosplayer, I must be going to Halloween. But that's a question asked by people who don't know otaku and cosplayers. Halloween is for normal people who want to change. They want to do something out of the ordinary and feel excited for one night... but it's *only* on Halloween night. They don't keep on cosplaying.

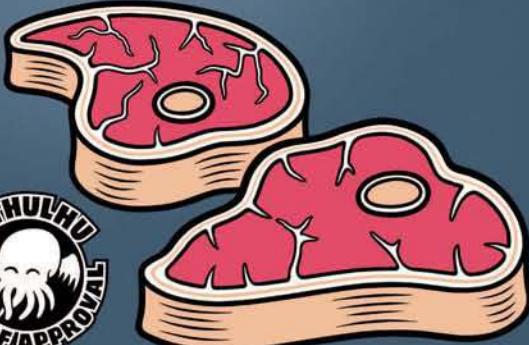
I've done cosplay for 17 years because I really like manga and anime, and I want to express my love for the characters by cosplaying, by expressing something, and I want to let people know, *This character is so cool, this anime is really good, please check it out!* I want to meet fans of the anime and manga, and make friends and share discussions.

Join the discussion and find Hikari online: see next page! ● >>

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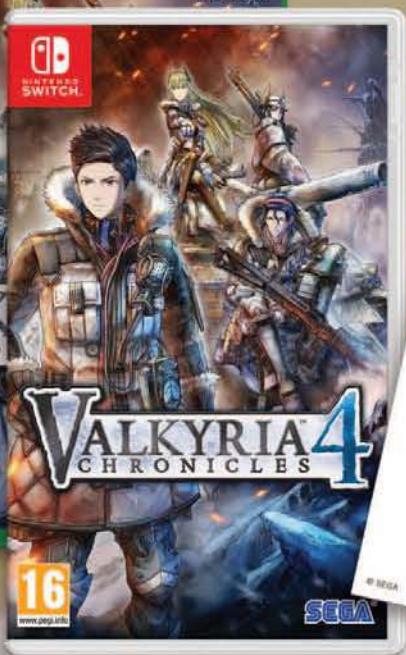


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1



“TEENS LOVE”
Believe it or not, it has taken until 2017 for the Teens Love sub-genre, which is to say, erotica for women, to officially get an anime show, arriving in the form of *On a Lustful Night Mingling with a Priest*, which broadcast in a PG-version on normal telly, a 15-rated version late-night on AT-X, and an R18-rated version on a dedicated streaming site.

MANGA SNAPSHOT

MINI SUGAR

Jonathan Clements turns into a dangerous night butterfly

ISSUE #40 // DEBUT YEAR: 2009 // PAGE COUNT: C.350 // PUBLISHER: SHUSUISHA // PRICE: 500 YEN (£3.50) // CYCLE: BIMONTHLY

MINI SUGAR (1) MAGAZINE is super-discreet, small enough to fit into your handbag, promising new manga and acknowledged masterpieces (they mean reprints) for the young reader who “turns dangerous night butterfly.”

The girl on the cover seems a little taken aback, as you would be if you not only discovered a tuning knob on your bra, but a man leering over you, trying to get Radio 4 on it. I jest, of course – unfamiliar with modern lingerie trends, I don’t actually know what that thing is supposed to be. The cover promises racy content, and, indeed, many of the pages within are too naughty to print in NEO. *Mini Sugar* purports to be a “Teens Love” manga, but I have my doubts.

In what is presumably a story inspired by, or at least commissioned in the wake of Makoto Shinkai’s *Your Name*, Nemuko Takayama’s *Discoveries of a Transformed Woman* (2) features a boy who is cursed (or possibly blessed) by a vengeful angel to wake up in a girl’s body.

The rules of modern gender politics require me to use a pronoun that acknowledges the protagonist’s self-identification as male or female, but in this case s/he literally can’t make up his/her mind. S/he wonders if a bright career awaits as a manga author or an agony aunt, but soon embraces new-found femininity when she goes out on a date with a former classmate.

Takayama’s manga relies on the richly fertile ground of sexual politics, as our protagonist fumbles around the correct forms of address and modes of conversation – in Japanese, girls are traditionally expected to use fungible, fudging verb-forms, leaving the possibility open that some man might need to correct them. And so our protagonist frantically tries to mind her Ps and Qs, carefully using vague declensions as if her every opinion, even about the weather, awaits a man’s approval. When her would-be boyfriend seizes her in a clinch in a park bench, however, she giggles to herself about how much fun it is to let someone else take control every once in a while. Yes, she’s pretty much decided to stay a she, in a manga that might appear on the surface to be sexist, but in fact explores many aspects of modern gender roles with humour and pragmatism.

And she’s not the only one in this issue, with Ayumu, the titular *BonQbon Boy* (3), by Kaya Kurata, similarly struggling

with the discovery that he’s woken up in a girl’s body. One senses in such stories a degree of schadenfreude, as the female reader watches a man having to deal with the kind of nonsense that a girl has to deal with every day – in social expectations, interactions and assumptions. This, however, is all a rather thin veneer over the real intentions, which is to deliver multiple sequences of Ayumu nakedly enjoying his/her voyage of discovery.

Such roles are reversed in another story in the magazine, *Kohai-kun and the Complicated 28-Year-Old OL* (4), which tells the story of a torrid affair between Seto and Kazumi, two college classmates unexpectedly reunited at the workplace, where he is a junior (*kohai*) in the office hierarchy, whereas the virginal Kazumi has precisely zero experience in the bedroom. Ritsuko Kamuro’s manga plays with the expectations in an asymmetrical romance – Kazumi loves Seto’s stamina and enthusiasm, although since she has no frame of reference, she is not sure where to rate him on a scale of one to ten. Meanwhile, although they are relatively evenly matched in the bedroom, they are in wildly different power positions in the office, leaving Kazumi constantly fretful about the degree to which she is abusing her power over a man who is her underling, even if he does shyly confess to having worshipped her from afar for two years.

We’re back in the office with *Thirties OL and Her Passionate Kohai* (5), except this time the man is also junior in years. Mio, the titular lady, very much enjoys his attentions, but can’t decide whether she wants something more serious, or should run a mile from a man who proclaims he loves her without thinking through the implications it might have for their life together. I will observe, for the record, that neither of these people in the two last-mentioned manga are “teens”, but that’s part of the confusion with this sub-genre, which is sometimes *about* teens, and sometimes *for* them. And, legally speaking these days, more like 20-somethings anyway.

Teens Love is a relatively new genre in manga publishing – there have been romance manga for girls for decades, of course, but they didn’t pursue love stories all the way into the bed and under the sheets. Historians like to date the origin of heterosexual manga erotica for teenage girls to 1995, with the publication of *L-Teen Comic*, but in doing so, they enter >>>



SEXUAL CHAOS WORLD

Mini Sugar features agony aunt Nensu Nyanbara and her advice strip *Sexual CHAOS World*. Problems include the fiancée convinced that her husband-to-be fancies her hot sister, the girlfriend whose BF can't help comparing her physical dimensions to those of his ex, and the frustrated teen who's just discovered that the man of her dreams is her long-lost brother.

>>> a minefield of misattributions and aspirations. *L-Teen Comic*, say the cognoscenti, might have been the first manga magazine to openly court the racy teenage romance market, but it did so on the coat-tails of 1992's *Young Love Comic Aya*, which purported to be for housewives and happy singletons, but really catered to a slightly younger demographic.

I don't know about you, but I'm fascinated by such contradictions. Many magazines, particularly in the youth market, need to make a fateful editorial decision if they are lucky enough to survive for a few years. Do they age with their readership, or do they let the readers move on? The varied answers to this question have created many of the manga schisms and rebrandings of recent times, with serials migrating to new homes to serve older or younger readers, or rebooting to serve the same age bracket for new readers.

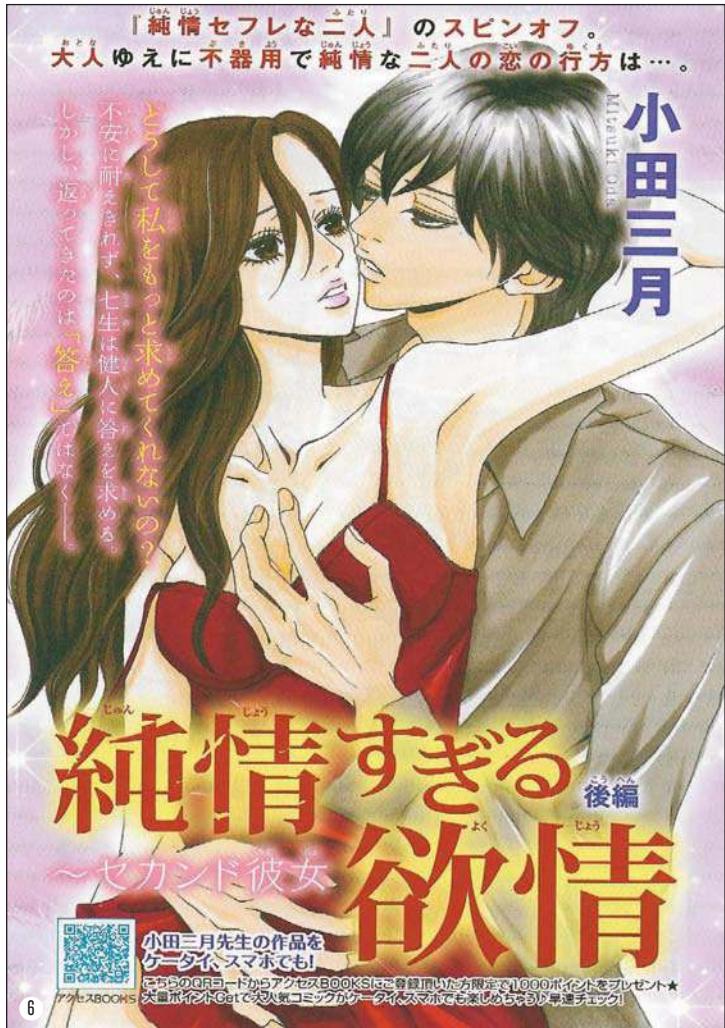
Some magazines pretend to be for one group in order to lure in another – most famously, the critic Kinko Ito has suggested that *You* magazine, supposedly the flagship of the yuppie office lady, served a not-so-secret readership of provincial shopgirls and lonely housewives, and indeed began life as a spin-off from a magazine called *Seventeen*. And who can forget *WAai! Boys in Skirts* (NEO 92), which supposedly served a cross-dressing readership, but which your correspondent timidly suggested might have been designed as a means of showing flat-chested jailbait in a more censorious climate?

FORBIDDEN LOVES

Censorship, or rather, the threat of it, has been a constant issue with the Teens Love market. This column examined a 2017 copy of *Young Love Comic Aya* in NEO 161, and pronounced it to be a

"MANY MAGAZINES, PARTICULARLY IN THE YOUTH MARKET, NEED TO MAKE A FATEFUL EDITORIAL DECISION IF THEY ARE LUCKY ENOUGH TO SURVIVE FOR A FEW YEARS. DO THEY AGE WITH THEIR READERSHIP, OR DO THEY LET THE READERS MOVE ON?"

title for women in their 30s. It's not for teenage girls, and so by Japan's relatively liberal trading standards traditions, that means we shouldn't expect teenage girls to be corrupted by it, much as I am unlikely to be bored to death by accidentally acquiring a copy of a trainspotting magazine. But the moment we start admitting a magazine is for teenagers, we suddenly come under much greater scrutiny and legal exposure. And this is indeed what happened with the Teens Love market, the straplines for which started to carefully parse its stories as "romance for dirty virgins," reporting not on supposed true stories like housewives' mags, but on possible hazards to be avoided by young innocents. See, it's educational. That, however, was not good enough for Tokyo authorities, who insisted that the previously teenage girls of the magazines should be specifically and clearly marked as over-18s.



There's a whole different set of problems in *Too Much Passion* (6) by Mitsuki Oda, in which our heroine is baffled by her boyfriend's lack of interest in sleeping over. Does he not like her, she wonders. Or is he afraid of getting intimate?

Well, Kento has some sort of childhood trauma he's working through, although it doesn't take that long, because after they've talked about his tragic childhood sweetheart, they spend the rest of the story in bed together.

Unsurprisingly, *Mini Sugar* excels at stories of straightforward erotica, but stumbles when it tries to inject any note of seriousness or depth. *Night Face of the Vigorous Lawyer* (7), by Oko Makuro, teases its readership with an opening sequence of what appears to be hair-pulling, face-slapping assault, only for the participants to be revealed as actors staging a re-enactment for the camera. When it's time for lawyer Mr Mihashi to escort the fake "victim" home, he confides to a colleague that this is going to be his third-time lucky. Sure enough, he persuades her to stop at a love hotel on the way, where they enjoy a passionate hour or so... until his companion realises that he wasn't using protection. Well, she says wistfully, what can possibly go wrong...? I mean, you love me, don't you...?

No, I'm not that sure that Mr Mihashi does, which leaves the To Be Continued logo that closes this threatening to dump a whole new set of dramas onto our already dramatic cast.

But the most dramatic thing in *Mini Sugar*, at least for me, is not to be found in the manga at all, but in the adverts, which paint a very different picture of the readership. Shocking even your unshockable correspondent is the advert on the back cover for a company called Hotfire, recruiting dexterous young ladies to work in a hands-on capacity at a special kind of massage parlour. It offers morning, afternoon and evening slots at a city centre

facility promising that the most nimble workers can pull off a daily income of £350 a day. "You only have to use your hands!" proclaims the advert, along with some little musical notes that imply this is some sort of theme song. Employees are offered the chance to pre-screen clients behind a "magic mirror" so that they don't have to touch anyone they don't like the look of, as well as an "alibi company" – which is to say, there is a whole secondary business set up to make everything look legitimate on bank statements, and in case curious relatives call up wondering where you are. Although "legitimate" is a difficult word to define here when dealing with Japanese law, since such establishments apparently count as health clinics, rather than brothels.

Other perks include FREE PARKING for all workers, and free lifts to the Ibaraki branch, which is clearly having trouble finding the staff. One imagines the 20-something (they do specify that) reader seeing the advert and doing the sums in her head. "If I pop in for the lunchtime shift, I won't have to pay for parking! I'll save three quid and make some pocket money!"

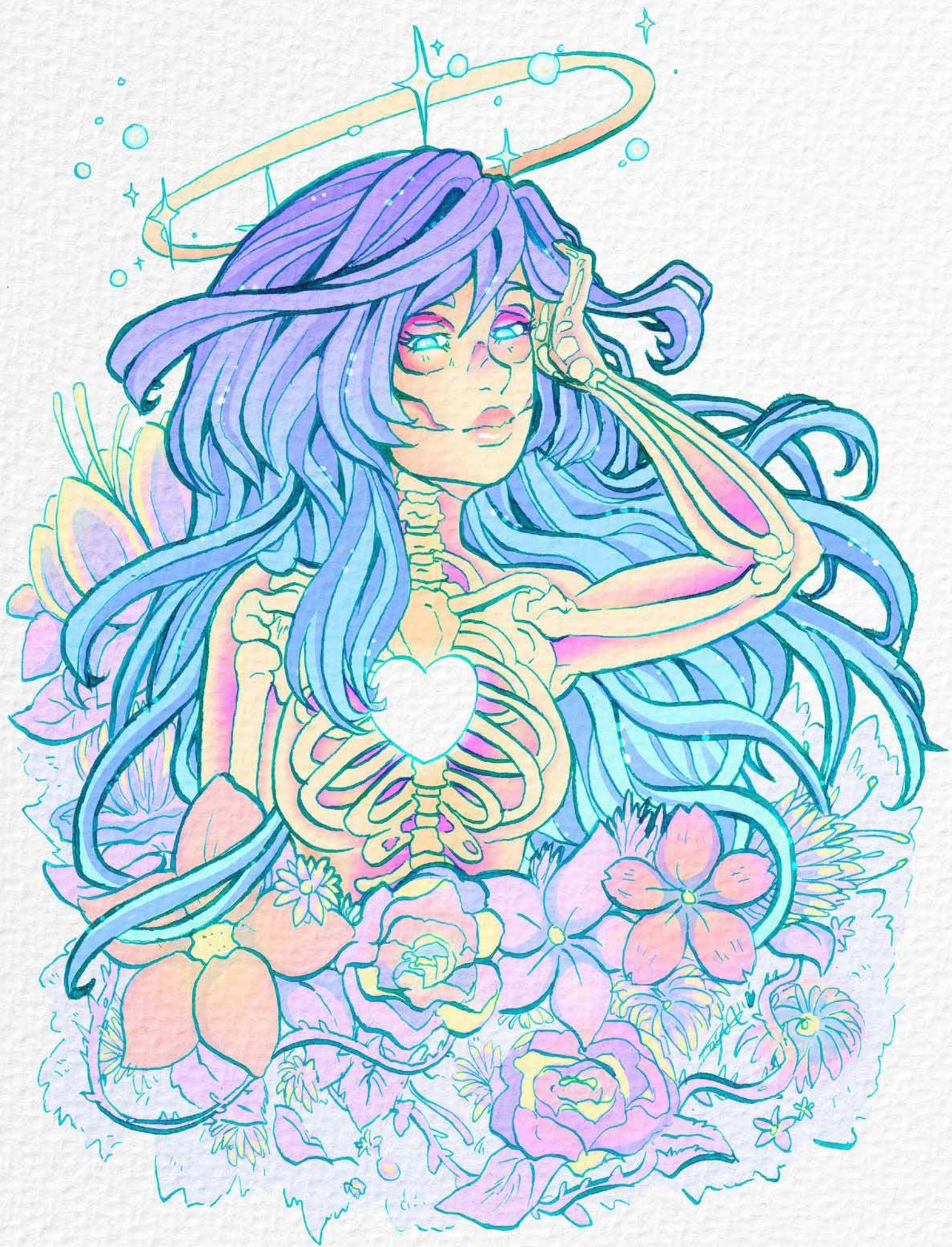
That, at least is the matter-of-fact attitude towards such content that *advertisers* in a magazine like *Mini Sugar* seems to expect, although the editorial tone itself is somewhat more cautious. Readers' letters in this issue include Miss Kazamaru (25) from Tokyo, who is keen to get kinky in her office boardroom. No, warn the editors, don't make life difficult for yourself or for your lucky colleague. Keep work and sex separate, and don't give Personnel a reason to fire you.

In other words, the editorial team still regard their magazine as a harmless, semi-educational fantasy for curious and inexperienced young ladies. The advertisers, however, think of the readership as a bunch of potential recruits for the sex industry. Which one is right...? ●



COSPLAY CINDERELLA

Cospo Made Me Cinderella, by Zawakko is an advertorial about a cosplaying app that allows a directionless office worker to show off online and become a celebrity. You too, it proclaims, can live the dream like the famous (?) "L8-eluh" featured here, although common to many fairy tales, the article neglects to mention the actual talent or drive required.



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BIOGRAPHY

Much like most artists, I've drawn for as long as I can remember. One of my earliest memories is of a drawing I did of a lizard from a wildlife book. I was thrilled with it, but when I showed my Dad, he asked me why one foot had three toes and the other five. From that moment I knew what it was to be an artist; to observe, and to do better next time. Since that moment I've tried to live by that sentiment.

While I have no formal art education (unless you count a 'C' in GCSE Art, and an 'E' in A-Level art) it hasn't stopped me from working hard and teaching myself how to draw. I went to university to study psychology and sociology, and continued to draw as a hobby. It wasn't until I started attending conventions that I realised that you could in fact, make a career out of art. Around this time *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure* had a huge impact on me and greatly influenced my art style and colour choices, as did *Berserk*. I fell in love with the characters and strove to make a fanart that I could feel showed the emotions Kento Miura poured into his work. I tried and failed many times on this, but in that trying I found my art style changed for the better too! Sharing my passion for my favourite characters naturally led me to selling my art at conventions. I haven't looked back since, and I'm now making a career of it with support from my followers, friends and partner!

Visit me online at [instagram.com/bluefayt.](https://www.instagram.com/bluefayt/)



INSPIRATION

My biggest inspiration by far is the manga *Berserk*: the artwork is just phenomenal! *Dungeons & Dragons* has really impacted me too. My character, Vangaard, is the leader and living up to that role requires a lot of creativity! I also find inspiration from the world, finding beauty in nature. I weirdly really like skeletons.



1. Honeko the Skeleton Girl: Honeko's my favourite OC to draw, she's able to make any part of her body invisible, so likes to leave her skeleton showing a lot! This was also my first try at using traditional line art with digital colouring. **2. Vangaard the Half-Orc Barbarian:** Van is my D&D character, and one of my first male OCs. He's been very fun to learn to draw male muscles with! **3. Gut's Love:** This is my love letter to *Berserk*. It took me 25 hours, and three re-draws, but I think I managed to show Guts' lonely love for Casca.

NEO WANTS YOU

If you are interested in submitting work to be featured in the NEO ARTIST SHOWCASE, please email mail@neomag.co.uk with 'ARTIST SHOWCASE' as your subject header, along with an internet link with examples of your work.



[ANIME REVIEW]

IN ANOTHER WORLD WITH MY SMARTPHONE COMPLETE SERIES

In Another World With My Male Privilege

OUT NOW // SONY PICTURES HOME ENTERTAINMENT // 12 // FANTASY // £27.99 (DUAL FORMAT) // 300 MINS // 12 EPISODES

PLOT After a stray thunderbolt kills teenager Touya Mochizuki, he accepts an offer from God to be brought back to life in an alternate fantasy world. There Touya learns to use magic, has adventures, spars with kings, and befriends a group of young women who all fall in love with him.

killed, and action scenes are passable rather than impressive. Yet as the series develops with more and more young women joining the cast, it morphs into a fully-fledged harem show.

Most harem series tend to fall into two broad camps, firstly those where the hero has to choose between a squad of women competing for his affections; secondly those where the hero has one true love but there's a large female cast to bump up the fanservice quotient. *In Another World* doesn't go for either of those scenarios. Instead, (spoiler) Touya gets all the girls. They all decide to share him in a polygamous marriage, so it's pure male wish fulfilment.

The one regard in which the series is completely true to the harem genre is the way Touya is a blank slate. There's no sense at all of what his life was like before God's thunderbolt took him out, he never mentions his old existence and he suffers zero culture shock despite arriving in a world populated by demi-humans. Moreover, despite being the newcomer to both magic and adventuring, Touya instantly takes charge of battles and tactics and the girls all gladly let him because he's a man. Looks like the patriarchy is just as real as the spells and dragons in this particular fantasy land.

In Another World doesn't exactly demand to be taken seriously. The world-building mixes elements at random and the character designs aren't very memorable but, gender politics aside, it's watchable and inoffensive so although it never soars, it never drags either. ●

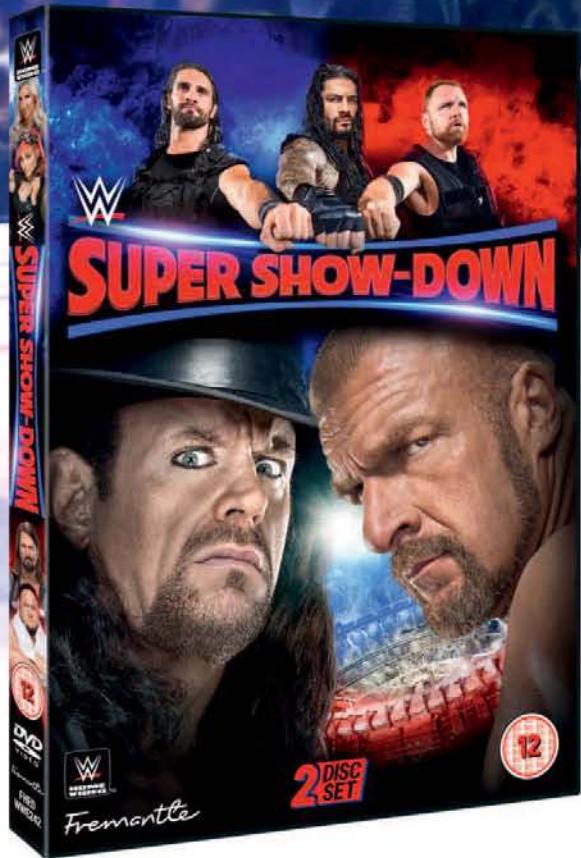
✿✿✿✿✿

EXTRAS

The English dub is a very good one and there are commentary tracks from some of the voice actors on two of the 12 episodes.

In *Another World With My Smartphone* starts in one place and ends up somewhere else entirely. At the outset, it positions itself as a fantasy series, albeit rather a lightweight one, as Touya arrives in his new world and sets about exploring it, with the aid of his smartphone. How does he have a signal in a world with no electricity where even the humble telegraph hasn't been invented yet? Now is not the time for such questions.

The hero soon makes some friends, all of whom happen to be young women, foremost among them sisters Elze and Linze Silhoueska and samurai girl Yae Kokonoe. They join a guild and undertake missions, dealing with monster wolves and a castle infested with slimes. It's fluffy but fun. There's zero sense of real danger, it's obvious no one is going to get hurt never mind



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[FILM REVIEW]

STEEL RAIN Two Minutes To Midnight In Korea

OUT NOW // NETFLIX // 15 // THRILLER // STREAMING // 139 MINS

PLOT A missile strike on North Korea's Great Leader heralds a military coup that threatens to reignite the Korean War. As both sides prepare for nuclear conflict, the only men who can stop the impending war are Northern agent Eom Cheol-u (Jung Woo-sung) and Southern Security Secretary Kwak Cheol-u (Kwak Do-won).

Yang Woo-seok's thriller is a slickly constructed blend of political intrigue and action movie spectacle boosted by strong performances from its leading actors. The two men, one from each side of the 38th parallel, view one another through the prisms of their own prejudices. Eom regards the Southerner as a decadent American puppet, while Kwak thinks the

Northerner is a brainwashed, unfeeling Communist drone. The screenplay, of course, allows them to discover what they have in common, although interestingly all the action hero stuff is left to Eom, while Kwak's forte is diplomacy and analysis. Yang's script throws all manner of interesting obstacles into their path and never resorts to depicting South Korea as sunshine and joy versus the dour North – urged on by the US, it's the President of the South who wants to launch a pre-emptive nuclear strike, despite the cost in civilian deaths. Action scenes are brutal and fast, and there's a distinctly Korean sense of tragedy.

This takes a far less cynical view of humanity than that found in other North-South thrillers like Ryoo Seung-wan's *The Berlin File*, but *Steel Rain* is tightly paced and firmly grounded emotionally by the two contrasting characters called Cheol-u. ●

WORDS BY ANDREW OSMOND



IF YOU LIKE THIS

There's more espionage and action in Ryoo Seung-wan's *The Berlin File* and Park Chan-wook's *JSA*, while Park Kwang-hyun's *Welcome To Dongmakgo* is a brilliant anti-war film.



[ANIME REVIEW]



GRANBLUE FANTASY THE ANIMATION PART 2

3 DECEMBER // MVM // 12 // FANTASY, ADVENTURE // £24.99 (BLU-RAY) // 170 MINS // 7 EPISODES (INCLUDING 2 OAV EPISODES)

PLOT Gran and Lyria grow closer during their continuing journey through the sky, but Lyria has very dark dreams...

We were snippy about *Granblue Fantasy* last month, so let's give it its due. It remains impressively attractive for TV: a Venetian-style city is particularly good. The show's earnest appeals to love and friendship are touching, as when the youngsters go on what's basically their first date through the fantasy Venice.

Later, when they're in a much darker place, there's even some truly emotional character animation – something the show's mostly starved of – as the hero begs his girlfriend not to

give into despair. She's just learned about her mysterious origins; it's very familiar stuff, but the show does its best to make us care.

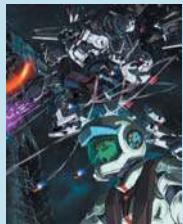
Disappointments include a noisy but unexciting finale that resolves nothing. According to reports last year, a second TV season was planned, but it's still not confirmed. The anti-climax rudely shoehorns in loads of out-of-nowhere guest appearances from what are presumably characters in the source game.

The two video episodes are fluff, which is annoying when they have a great idea. They're set in an alternate timeline where the magic princess is paired up with a heroic girl, rather than the standard-order boy. But rather than do anything interesting with this bold change, their adventures are merely time filling.

The highlights are better than the first volume, but there still aren't enough of them. ●

EXTRAS

Japanese and English tracks.



[ANIME REVIEW]

GUNDAM THUNDERBOLT: DECEMBER SKY

Mecha and madmen

19 NOVEMBER // ANIME LIMITED // 15 // SCI-FI, WAR, DRAMA // £34.99
(BLU-RAY) // 70 MINS

PLOT During the terrible “One Year” spacewar, a battle amid the ruins of a giant colony becomes the stage for a bitter feud between two men...

Gundam Thunderbolt: December Sky is tremendous and indigestible. In terms of technical quality, it’s on a level with practically any cinema anime, and yet it’s so hard to take in on a single viewing that it’s better suited to home formats, to be re-viewed at your convenience. In that respect, the fact the film’s “only” 70 minutes long is a plus – believe us, it’s a packed 70 minutes.

One limitation is that, like *Gundam: The Origin*, the films assumes familiarity with the original 1979 *Gundam*. *December Sky* has no guest star characters, but it assumes you’re up to speed with the Earth-Zeon conflict, space colonies, and references to Minovsky Particles (though pointedly there are no cute Haro ball-bots). But paradoxically, it’s tempting to see *Thunderbolt* not as a side-story, but rather as a reboot where characters like Char don’t exist. Unlike *Origin*, *Thunderbolt* isn’t that kind of *Gundam*.

Even more than the original show, the film cuts between the two sides of the conflict with godlike impartiality. Indeed, one of the *Thunderbolt*’s oddities is that for all its gritty darkness, it invokes literal-feeling *deus ex machinas*, courtesy of the

lightning discharges in the region of outer space where the story’s set. On one side are the survivors of a shattered space colony, whose wreckage provides a lurid but somber backdrop. Smashed skyscrapers float like manmade asteroids, but there are also school buses drifting in the void, even tricycles, random memories of countless dead. Opposing the colony survivors is a Zeon unit of soldiers who are amputees but still serve as snipers, hiding in the giant ruin of their enemies’ home.

The main characters – on opposite sides, naturally – are Io, an adrenaline-addicted mecha pilot, and Daryl, a paraplegic Zeon sniper. Each slaughters the other’s comrades, starting a feud that escalates as they’re given new technology. The film focuses, with needlepoint irony, on how war is stoked by love and hate working together. Each character is humanised by his friends and lovers, who also cement the men’s mutual hate.

Io is initially set up as a “Space Ace” pulp type, but that caricature slips away, replaced by an overgrown boy who thinks he’s a space ace. Daryl determinedly thinks of himself as a hero rather than the victim of an appalling experiment that’s effectively a horrid spoof of the old *Six Million Dollar Man* (we can rebuild him indeed!).

Visually amazing, the film is hampered by its visual-story overload and by a few battle sequences that are just too fast to follow. Its integrity also feels marred by a sequel-hook end sequence, leading into the second *Thunderbolt* film, *Bandit Flower*.

A sometimes staggering film, but it may take several watches to process. ●



TRIVIA

Japanese and English tracks. While the original *Gundam* originated as an anime, this film is based on a manga published in the 2010s, written by Yasuo Ohtagaki. The anime first appeared as an online serial before being compiled into the two *Thunderbolt* feature films.



[ANIME REVIEW]

JUNJO ROMANTICA SEASON 2

19 NOVEMBER // ANIME LTD // 15 // COMEDY, ROMANCE // £22.99 (BLU-RAY), £26.68 (DVD) // 300 MINS // 12 EPISODES

PLOT Three couples. Three loosely interconnected love-stories. Picking up where season one left off, *Junjo Romantica* continues to examine the trials and tribulations of romance in all its shapes and forms. Facing off against unrequited love, jealousy and power games, can these six gentlemen ever find true happiness?

Famed as the most popular of all Boys Love manga to make the transition to anime, *Junjo Romantica* is in many ways the definition of a marmite series. Any rom-com lives and dies by how much the audience can invest in and relate to its leads, and while the guys might look the part, their personalities will rub

many the wrong way. It's a shame, as the show's approach to romance is refreshingly adult in tone – especially when set in contrast to the countless high-school sweetheart stories anime has given us over the years. *Junjo Romantica* isn't afraid to show the sharper complexities of love, baring everything – quite literally – in the process.

But it's not enough. For all that its needy, narcissistic characters offer a certain thrill for a while, *Junjo Romantica* lays it on so thickly the show soon starts to feel like a bad soap opera. Coupled with comedy that largely falls flat and visuals that – at ten years old – look remarkably dated already, this is one romance that feels all too much like a product of its time.

This trio of romances offers surprising bite, but if you struggle to warm to its cast of love-stuck lads, there's little to keep you hooked. ●

WORDS BY MITCHELL LINEHAM



[GAME REVIEW]

**WARRIORS FROM ANOTHER LAND**

SoulCalibur VI features Geralt from *The Witcher* and 2B from *NieR: Automata* as guest characters. Guests in the past have included Yoda and Darth Vader from *Star Wars*, Spawn, and Link from *The Legend of Zelda*.

SOULCALIBUR VI Lost to History?

OUT NOW // BANDAI NAMCO // 16 // FIGHTING // £49.99 (PC), £54.99 (PS4), £54.99 (XBOX ONE)

PLOT *SoulCalibur VI* is the first game in the series in six years, and it's the series' last chance to prove itself as a mainstay franchise. Serving as a soft reboot, *VI* takes you back to the beginning to uncover secrets that were thought to have been lost to history.

Boasting unique weapons-based gameplay, each character in the roster of *SCVI* feels wildly different. It's almost like rock-paper-scissors in how you approach each battle, mixing up a variety of low, middle and high attacks as you try to outwit your opponent. The new Reversal Edge system puts this gameplay into focus,

seeing both opponents push away from one another, only to soar back into action with whichever attack, or defensive action, you've chosen to utilise. This sometimes slows the game down, especially if it's spammed, but it's a cool mechanic which wonderfully fits the core mechanics.

The game features an abundance of single-player content, but it fails to captivate. There's plenty of world-building but the world struggles to be interesting, and you bounce from battle to battle with very little to split them up outside of the dull text-heavy segments. It's easy to appreciate the volume of content, but it quickly shows how shallow the gameplay can be, and very little story progress is made in spite of the floods of text.

SoulCalibur VI is a competent fighting game with solid mechanics and an in-depth narrative. ●



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WIN JACKIE CHAN'S PROJECT A & PROJECT A PART II

Have we got a special prize for you this issue?! From distributors Eureka, we've got three copies of *Jackie Chan's Project A & Project A Part II* on Blu-ray to give away, containing some of Chan's best work, and representing a massive leap forward for Hong Kong filmmaking.

Turn to page 090 for more about the movie itself, which earned 5/5 from our reviewer David West, who called 1983's *Project A*, "a highwater mark in Jackie Chan's career, a brilliant blend of stunts and comedy that broke new ground for Hong Kong's action filmmakers." This special edition from Eureka brings these two classic films to UK audiences with brand new 2k restorations and in a fully uncut format. The special boxset is limited to only 4000 copies, and contains scores of features including an export cut of 1987's *Project A Part II* with a unique English dub track, along with interviews with director Jackie Chan, actors Lee Hoi San, Yuen Biao, Dick Wei, and Michael Chan Wai-Man, composer Michael Lai, and stuntmen Antony Carpio and Mars. It also features deleted scenes, behind the scenes footage, and a collector's booklet for each film with new essays by James Oliver.

If you'd like to win a copy of this limited edition Blu-ray set, all you have to do is enter into the draw by answering the following question correctly.

WHEN WAS *PROJECT A* RELEASED IN HONG KONG ORIGINALLY?

- A) 1982 B) 1983 C) 1987**

You can enter by emailing your answer along with your name and address to neomagcomp@gmail.com, with the subject header NEO 182 *Jackie Chan's Project A & Project A Part II* competition. Alternatively, you can enter by sending the correct answer on the back of a postcard, along with your address, to the Uncooked Media editorial address printed on page 084. Closing date: 20 December



TERMS AND CONDITIONS

No correspondence will be entered into. No employees of Uncooked Media or the companies providing the prizes may enter. No cash alternative is offered to these prizes. Entries are only valid if they reach us by the closure date. Multiple entries will be disregarded. The publisher's decision is final. Good luck!

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[ANIME REVIEW]

CODE GEASS: LELOUCH OF THE REBELLION I - INITIATION

A Rebellious Recap

26 NOVEMBER // ANIME LIMITED // 15 // ADVENTURE // £34.99 (BLU-RAY) // 135 MINS

PLOT The world is dominated by the Holy Britannian Empire, and in Area 11, resistance seems futile. Exiled Britannian prince Lelouch Lamperouge works to take revenge on the Empire that has forsaken him.

Announced as part of *Code Geass*' tenth anniversary celebrations, *Initiation* is the first of three films recapping the events of the first two seasons of the show in preparation for its third season due in the very near future. With roughly 17 episodes' worth of content

to cover, the film has absolutely no time to mess around, resulting in pretty much everything that doesn't involve Lelouch's rebellion against Britannia ending up on the cutting room floor. On the one hand, this means a far more streamlined approach to *Code Geass* that sticks to the main points, but on the other, it results in several characters having their stories stripped away completely – leaving the film rather bare when it comes to developed cast members. The film features a brand new opening sequence featuring all new footage, but other than that there's very little in the way of new content to entice existing fans.

While *Initiation* simply can't match up to the experience of watching *Code Geass*, it's a perfectly serviceable abridged version. ●

★★★★★

WORDS BY ANDREW OSMOND



[ANIME REVIEW]



MARCH COMES IN LIKE A LION SEASON 1: PART 2

26 NOVEMBER // ANIME LIMITED // TBC // DRAMA, COMEDY, COMPETITION // £59.99 (BLU-RAY) // 275 MINS // 11 EPISODES

PLOT Rei's progress in the shogi world is about to be derailed... which may be exactly what he needs...

The second volume of this unique anime maintains the heights of the first. Rei is still troubled, but the series won't let him slip back into the doldrums we've already seen. True, he finds perverse reasons for staying away from the ever-welcoming sister trio, who take a reduced role this volume. But instead, Rei will develop a compelling relationship with one of his shogi rivals, a deceptively colourless-seeming older man who'll become one of his most important teachers and lift him out of his self-

absorption. This man is no standard inspirational figure; rather he's a dimensional character who's filled out over the volume until you may root for him over Rei.

As Rei's perspective broadens, he travels outside Tokyo – there's a warm depiction of a country town clinging on in Japan's sticks, populated by hardy OAPs. There are tortuously tense tournaments, and scary shogi-obsessed boy maniacs who conduct arguments like warfare. There are also great gags, involving a certain Hollywood blockbuster film and a single man's love for his cat – yes, the cats go on proliferating. Shaft's outstanding presentation still blends emotional dynamism with the studio's artful switches in visual style, making a fine story even more absorbing.

As good as the great first volume – roll on season two! ●

★★★★★

EXTRAS

Japanese and English tracks.



HIGURASHI SEASON 3 ("REI") One more time (slip)

17 DECEMBER // MVM // CERT 15 // FANTASY, MYSTERY // DVD (£19.99) // 150 MINS

PLOT Shrine maiden Rika is shocked to slip, yet again, into an alternate-timeline version of her town Hinamizawa – but one which differs significantly from anything she's experienced...

Higurashi definitely seemed to end in the second TV season. This “season three” is a much smaller spinoff, containing just five video episodes (though at 30 minutes each, they’re longer than TV episodes). Really you can forget the first and last parts; it’s the story in the middle three that’s interesting.

It’s not a horror story like the first season, though it has some dark elements, demonstrating that while Rika looks like a cute child, her experiences have hardened her so that

she can seem inhuman. Nor is this an exciting action drama like much of season two. Instead, it’s a quieter, reflective coda, the kind of thing anime spinoffs sometimes do when there’s no obvious way to continue the story.

As such, it’s a good example of its type. It’s slow and talky heavy, and some viewers may hate how it ends (with lots of talk), but it’s genuinely interesting if you dug *Higurashi*’s concepts, themes and its underlying journey beyond the recurring bloody violence. As for the other two episodes, they’re super-broad, out-of-continuity gag-fests. The first episode escalates so ridiculously that it’s quite amusing, with pool hijinks and swimming trunks. The last episode, though, is just pants.

No thriller like the outstanding TV show, but a good epilogue if you’re prepared for something slow and thinky. ●



EXTRAS

Japanese soundtrack. A Blu-ray edition will be released in March next year. Further *Higurashi* OAVs were released in Japan, but there’s no word on if they’ll get to the UK.

WORDS BY MITCHELL LINEHAM

[ANIME REVIEW]



DIGIMON ADVENTURE TRI - THE MOVIE PART 6: OUR FUTURE

3 DECEMBER // MANGA UK // CERT 12 // ACTION, COMEDY, SCI-FI // £19.99 (DVD), £24.99 (BLU-RAY) // 98 MINS

Picking up directly after the shocking events of the end of the fifth movie, *Our Future* sees the DigiDestined battle against an intruder who has appeared in the human world. With each character doing their best, can they do more than their duties as the DigiDestined?

Our Future is as much a story of the cast growing up as it is of them saving the world, which gets to the heart of what *Digimon* is – a tale of friendship and doing what’s good.

The full party might not be together for a good chunk of this movie, but they’re all fighting the same battle to protect two worlds. A giant battle and several heart-felt moments will tug at your heartstrings, and there’re a few surprises that might take you unaware as the movie reaches its climax. Omnimon is still the coolest *Digimon* around!

Our Future is a fitting end to *tri.* and it still feels like a natural progression for the series, although is not the strongest entry overall. ●



WORDS BY DAVID WEST



[FILM REVIEW]

ILLANG: THE WOLF BRIGADE

OUT NOW // NETFLIX // CERT 15 // ACTION, THRILLER // STREAMING // 140 MINS

In Kim Jee-woon’s adaptation of Mamoru Oshii’s anime classic *Jin-Roh: The Wolf Brigade*, now streaming on Netflix in the UK, the setting is switched from post-war Japan to Korea in the near future.

The story concerns the struggle for power between Public Security, commanded by Han (Kim Moo-Yul, *A Muse, Snatch Up*), and the Special Unit, an elite anti-terror force. Han orders undercover operative Lee Yun-hee (Han Hyo-joo, *Cold Eyes, Beauty Inside*) to frame Special Unit member Im Joong-kyung (Gang Don-won, *A Violent Prosecutor*, also upcoming Hollywood movie *Tsunami LA*), but Yun-hee’s feelings for Im threaten the mission.

Oshii’s original story is a brilliant and harrowing look at the dehumanising effects of power and violence, but *Illang* loses sight of that message amidst all the impressively staged action scenes.

Kim’s film offers a predictable clash of good versus evil with a disappointingly weak conclusion. ●





[ANIME REVIEW]

NO GAME NO LIFE: ZERO

Zeroes to Heroes!



19/11 (DVD), 03/12 (COLLECTOR'S BLU-RAY) // MVM // 15 // SCI-FI, ROMANCE // £19.99 (DVD), £34.99 (COLLECTOR'S) // 105 MINS

PLOT Six millennia before the events of the original series, Riku, the tormented leader of a desperate colony of humans, finds his war-torn life changed forever when he comes across Schwi, an outcast android who seeks to understand the workings of the human heart. Together, will they be able to understand each other, and survive the conflict that ravages their world?

While the world of *No Game No Life* is a technicoloured and often joyful place for its characters to inhabit, it wasn't always that way! *No Game No Life: Zero*, the new instalment in the cult hit franchise, takes viewers back thousands of years into the past, to the appropriately-named 'Great War' between the mythical beings that seek to become deities of the world, and the seemingly-helpless humans whose lives are forfeit when they find themselves caught in the middle of the battle. However, if this sounds like the premise for a no-holds-barred action adventure, then you might find this movie to be quite different from what you expected.

The majority of the movie focuses on the relationship between Riku, the young but brilliant tactician who finds himself in the unenviable position of trying to keep his friends and allies alive in an altogether hostile world, and Schwi, one

of the robotic 'Ex Machina' whose deviation from her hive-mind's programming has rendered her innocent but alone.

This plotline definitely has its moments, and what starts out looking like it could be a fairly trope-ridden affair actually ends up having more than a few genuinely heartfelt moments over the course of the movie. That being said, this is arguably the title's Achilles heel as well, as the relationship between the two lead characters can feel a little forced at times, with the pair professing undying affection by the culmination of the movie's relatively short runtime. Obviously, this is par for the course compared to a full-length series or even the light novels that *No Game No Life* is based on, but some viewers might find the lack of development a little disappointing.

However, something that doesn't disappoint is the visuals. *No Game No Life* is already a series known for its stunning art and animation, and this feature-length prequel is no exception on that front. While, as mentioned, the world is somewhat more bleak than its present day counterpart, the movie still bursts with colour from every frame.

If you're a committed fan of the series already, or even just want to kick back and watch some grade-A artwork go by for 90 minutes or so, there's certainly something for you to enjoy here.

Perhaps understandably, it might not grab everyone, but for those who can buy into the rushed but sincere storyline, *No Game No Life: Zero* will serve as both a gorgeous piece of cinematic art, and a worthwhile narrative successor to the previous series. ●

★★★★★

VOICE ACTORS

The keen-eared among you might be able to tell that Riku and Schwi are played by the same voice actors as the original series' Shiro and Sora, further weaving the two tales together!



[GAME REVIEW]

MY HERO ONE'S JUSTICE

Almost Plus Ultra

OUT NOW // BANDAI NAMCO ENTERTAINMENT // 12 // FIGHTING // £44.99 (SWITCH), £49.99 (PC), £54.99 (PS4), £54.99 (XBOX ONE)

PLOT *My Hero One's Justice* follows *My Hero Academia*'s story, alongside some "what if" stories, from the U.A. Students' fight with Stain, up until the climactic fight between two big powerhouses. You then play through the same story, but from the villains' point of view!

Byking doesn't have much experience with fighting games, but they've captured the spirit of the source material. Each character feels distinct from the others, and their movesets make good use of their unique Quirks – their superpowers.

One's Justice might never make an impact in the competitive scene, but its charm and colour are bound to please

plenty of *My Hero Academia* fans. Destructible environments, accessible gameplay, and fan-favourite characters will keep you coming back, although watch out for the Todoroki family online – they're hard to deal with!

You can play using "normal" controls, which implements an auto-combo system, but "manual" is preferred if you want greater control of your combos, especially as the auto-combo system locks you out of higher damage-dealing moves, as well as sometimes getting in the way of performing evasive manoeuvres. It's odd that it forces you to use the "normal" control scheme in the game's expansive Mission Mode, though.

My Hero One's Justice is a solid first outing that captures the charm of the anime, but a bit more polish could've done wonders. If there's going to be a sequel, Byking have laid a great foundation to work from with this game. Plus Ultra! ●



WORDS BY LAURENCE GREEN

HERE IN SPIRIT

There are a few Class 1-A omissions in the roster, but several of them have accessories that you can use to customise the playable heroes.



TRIVIA

Like many of the other powerful jutsu in the *Naruto* series – such as Sasuke's Susanoo or Itachi's Amaterasu – the Infinite Tsukuyomi is drawn from the name of a god in ancient Japanese mythology. Tsukuyomi literally means 'moon reading' – rather fitting, considering the jutsu's visual appearance in the show!

[ANIME REVIEW]



NARUTO SHIPPUDEN BOX 34

19 NOVEMBER // MANGA ENTERTAINMENT // 15 // ACTION // £19.99 (DVD) // 350 MINS // 14 EPISODES

PLOT As the Fourth Great Ninja War continues, the allied shinobi are caught under the spell of the Infinite Tsukuyomi, trapping them in a dreamlike world. What will their illusionary visions show them?

Longtime *Naruto* viewers are certainly having their patience tested – with the show's big final battle effectively on pause while we dip into more flashbacks, it's hard not to feel frustrated with the glacial pace the series has been taking in reaching its conclusion. That said, this set kicks off with what is arguably one of the finest backstories the show has

ever told – finally shedding light on the origins of Sasuke's red-haired, glasses-wearing teammate Karin. It's a brutal, heart-wrenching tale, and reminds us *Naruto* can still deliver real emotional punch when it needs to.

Following that, the show plunges into a series of episodes that essentially explore what the ninja world would have been like if certain characters had lived instead of died – the results are surprising, not least because they see old villains popping up in dramatically different circumstances. Likewise, by giving us a compact alternate history of the show's timeline, there's a reflective – almost melancholy – tone to this set, as we're treated to a kind of tweaked version of *Naruto*'s 'greatest hits'. The end is nearly in sight... ●

The show's side characters get a real chance to shine here! ●



The late and sorely missed Leslie Cheung gave one of his best performances for Ching in *A Chinese Ghost Story*.



A LIFE IN ACTION

In London to give a masterclass on action filmmaking at the BFI, Tony Ching Siu-Tung talks to NEO's David West about working with King Hu, Tsui Hark and Zhang Yimou, and why he likes to throw his old ideas away.

PERHAPS IT WAS inevitable that Tony Ching Siu-Tung would wind up working in the movie business. His father, Ching Kong, was a director at Shaw Brothers and that was where Tony Ching started his career, first as an extra and stunt performer, then as an action choreographer. One of his first action director credits was on 1972's *The 14 Amazons*, directed by his dad, and just over a decade later, Tony Ching turned director with the spectacular swordplay film *Duel To The Death*. Since then he's had to balance directing his own films, including *A Chinese Ghost Story* and *Executioners*, with a prolific career as an action choreographer. For the latter, he's worked with the biggest names in Hong Kong and Chinese cinema, including Tsui Hark, John Woo, Stephen Chow, and Zhang Yimou. However, at the outset there was no expectation to follow in his father's footsteps. "Basically, my father left us free to choose and he hadn't taught me anything, really, regarding the movie industry," says Ching. "But when I was growing up, I always liked going to the studios and watching all the films by the famous directors like King Hu."

King Hu, who made such classics as *Come Drink With Me* and *A Touch Of Zen*, was an old friend from childhood. "Growing up, we often spent time together and I went over to Hu's house," says Ching. "When I started my career, I was working as an action choreographer and I was a stunt double for some of the actors in his films. I like King Hu a lot and I like his movies because his films concentrated on expressing martial arts in a poetic way and in a romantic way."

Ching, King Hu and Tsui Hark were three of the directors on 1990's

Swordsman, a key film in the New Wave of wuxia movies that were hugely popular in the early 1990s, and Tsui's and Ching's career have long intertwined. Tsui produced *A Chinese Ghost Story*, while Ching was action director on many of Tsui's best films including *Peking Opera Blues* and *The Raid*. One of their early collaborations was the notorious *Dangerous Encounter – 1st Kind*, which was considered so violent that it was initially rejected by Hong Kong's censors.

"That's why we need to know what the audience wants," says Ching. "Sometimes you can make a movie that is too bloodthirsty, too violent for that audience, so you need to be aware of where the movie is going to be released. You need to do research to make sure the movie matches up with the audience. You can't just do your own thing in total ignorance of what's happening out there. If you want to have a long career, you have to adapt. Otherwise, you can put out one or two movies doing whatever you want, but afterwards you'll never direct again."

STRANGE TALES

A Chinese Ghost Story, from 1987, was ground-breaking in its use of special effects in Hong Kong cinema, all of which were accomplished in the pre-CGI age. Loosely based on a tale from the anthology *Strange Stories From A Chinese Studio*, the movie featured stop motion animation and inventive handheld camerawork, alongside high flying action and a giant demonic tongue.

"At that stage, you couldn't rely on post-production technology to finish



It all gets a bit messy for Jay Chou in *Curse Of The Golden Flower*, one of the collaborations between Tony Ching and Zhang Yimou.

"IF YOU WANT TO HAVE A LONG CAREER, YOU HAVE TO ADAPT. OTHERWISE, YOU CAN PUT OUT ONE OR TWO MOVIES DOING WHATEVER YOU WANT, BUT AFTERWARDS YOU'LL NEVER DIRECT AGAIN."



The master speaks – Tony Ching at the BFI for his masterclass on action.

a movie. We had to create our own, original methods to accomplish what we were trying to do," says Ching. "Most of the time I was holding the camera myself and I used a lot of wide-angle lenses while shooting that film. Because that was a ghost story, you need a bigger space to capture those ideas, so even in a close-up I used wide angle lenses."

Wu Ma, a veteran actor and director who often played comic roles, was cast against type as the swordsman Yin, but he delivered one of the defining performances of his career. "He's from a similar generation to me," says Ching. "His look actually fits in with the period setting and he wasn't involved in action roles before, so I used my own methods to help him perform his action scenes and it worked well in the end. And the main lead actors, Leslie Cheung and Joey Wang, were not really in action movies before this. The original story is actually very different from our take on it in the movie. We were trying to create something totally new."

ARTHOUSE ACTION

When Zhang Yimou, a director known for his arthouse dramas, decided to tackle the wuxia genre, he brought in Ching as action choreography for his films *Hero*, *House Of Flying Daggers* and *Curse Of The Golden Flower*. "Working with a director like Zhang Yimou, it's much clearer to distinguish whether you're a professional action choreographer or not," says Ching.

"As a professional choreographer, although the director is not familiar

with action, you can provide lots of examples of different ways to approach it for him to choose the right one for the movie. If you're not a professional, you might concentrate too much on your own little area of choreography and you'll just keep producing lots of different action scenes, but they might not be what the director wants. I'm able to work with all kinds of different directors and give them what they want. Sometimes in their minds, they want the action to be a certain way and they would express their ideas to me, but I would think of an alternative way that's even better and suggest it to them and they think, wow, that's much better. That's my style of working."

Uppermost in Ching's mind is the desire to make something audiences haven't seen before. "I've always believed that the movie industry has to renew itself all the time," he says. "Every movie is different and you can't use the same things forever and ever. You always need new ideas to keep it fresh. Even now, when I'm making movies I want new ideas. I like to throw away all my old ideas and emerge with something even better." ●

FIGHTING WITHOUT FIGHTING

Ching is an expert at taking non-martial artists and helping them look like seasoned fighting machines on screen. "For example, in the *Swordsman* films, Brigitte Lin knew nothing about kung fu," he says, "but in the end I managed to make her look like a very good kung fu star."

Tools Of The Trade

Ching says the CGI revolution in filmmaking hasn't changed the role of action directors. "The most important thing is creativity, using your brain," he says. "Post-production and computer graphics, they're just like a piece of equipment. You need to provide ideas, to give them input, otherwise there will be nothing."



THIS IS HALLOWEEN

J-IDOL MAHIRU HITS TOKYO'S DISNEY PARKS AT HER FAVOURITE TIME OF YEAR!

HELLO, MAHIRU KURUMIZAWA here, from Japanese idol group Moso Calibration! This issue I'd like to introduce Disney Halloween! This is a big event that's held at Tokyo Disney Land and Tokyo Disney Sea (yes, there are two separate Disney theme parks in Tokyo!) since late September each year. During this period you are allowed to cosplay any Disney character or thing related to Disney. For example, you could even cosplay as a dancer from one of the stage shows. Because of this, many cosplayers and big Disney fans make sure to attend during this special time of year.

I visit both Disney parks every Halloween! This year I decided to cosplay Snow White and Thumper the rabbit from *Bambi*. I saw a mixture of handmade cosplay and ready-made during the event, and all different levels of cosplay – all is welcome!

Last year I cosplayed as Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* and visited the

Mermaid Lagoon Theatre where the real Ariel gave me lots of res! (I think you guys call this fan service in English). For example, she waved her hands and gave me eye contact and winks. I was sooooo happy with receiving res from her! A real Disney princess noticed me!! Last year I also cosplayed Marie from *The Aristocats* and got lots of praise from people walking by.

This year Shibuya has a big problem with too many people gathering at the scramble crossing in front of the Hachiko statue during Halloween. Previously crazy party people turned over a car and made lots of noise, but I feel that Halloween at Disney Land and Sea is much more graceful and peaceful. There are lots of friends and couples just walking around and relaxing instead.

Don't worry if you're a cosplayer who goes to Disney without a cameraman, there are professional photographers at the parks too waiting to take your pic, which you can then purchase via the internet. As I said, I've been cosplaying at the Disney Halloween event for several years, and each time more and more people are adopting cosplay! Maybe next time I'll see one of the NEO readers in cosplay there too? Come, come! ●



Little Dragons Café

From the creator of
Harvest Moon

Yasuhiro Wada



OUT NOW



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[FILM REVIEW]

THE NIGHT COMES FOR US

The Raid reunion misses the bulls-eye

OUT NOW // NETFLIX // 18 // ACTION // STREAMING // 120 MINS //

PLOT When Triad enforcer Ito (Joe Taslim) spares a young girl after being ordered to eliminate her entire village, he brings down the full wrath of the criminal organisation upon him. Even his old friend Arian (Iko Uwais) is dispatched to kill Ito, but taking out a deadly assassin isn't easy.

With Joe Taslim, Iko Uwais, and Julie Estelle in the cast, *The Night Comes For Us* feels like a reunion of the key players from Gareth Evans' *The Raid* and its sequel. Stylistically and tonally, director Timo Tjanhanto reads from the same hymn sheet at Evans. *The Night Comes For Us* is gruesome and relentless in its violence, giving even Kim Jee-woon's demented *I Saw The Devil* a run for its money. The film is essentially a sequence of set pieces in which characters are stabbed, dismembered, shot, blown up, and battered to death in gleeful detail.

Uwais is credited as lead action choreographer and there is a good deal of creativity amongst the slaughter. He's assisted in his endeavours by Very Tri Yulisman, who was Baseball Bat Man in *The Raid 2*, and Muhammad Irwan who was action coordinator on Tjanhanto's *Headshot*, which also starred Uwais and Estelle.

Action aside, this film's weakness is the paper thinness

of the plot, which could fit on the back of a napkin, and the lack of attention devoted to giving the characters personalities. Regarding the first point, the set-up is little more than a pretext for all the mayhem that follows. Ito is one of the Six Seas, the assassins that the Triads send in when a job calls for the most extreme bloodshed, so his sudden change of heart really needs to be much more compelling. The girl that Ito saves, and spends the rest of the film murdering people to protect, is given too little screen time to care about, while the actions of the supporting cast become increasingly inexplicable. Julie Estelle plays another assassin who, for reasons that never become clear, decides to help Ito, although that's only after she's tried to kill him first. Taslim snarls his way through every scene but Uwais is the more engaging of the two, playing against type as a villain.

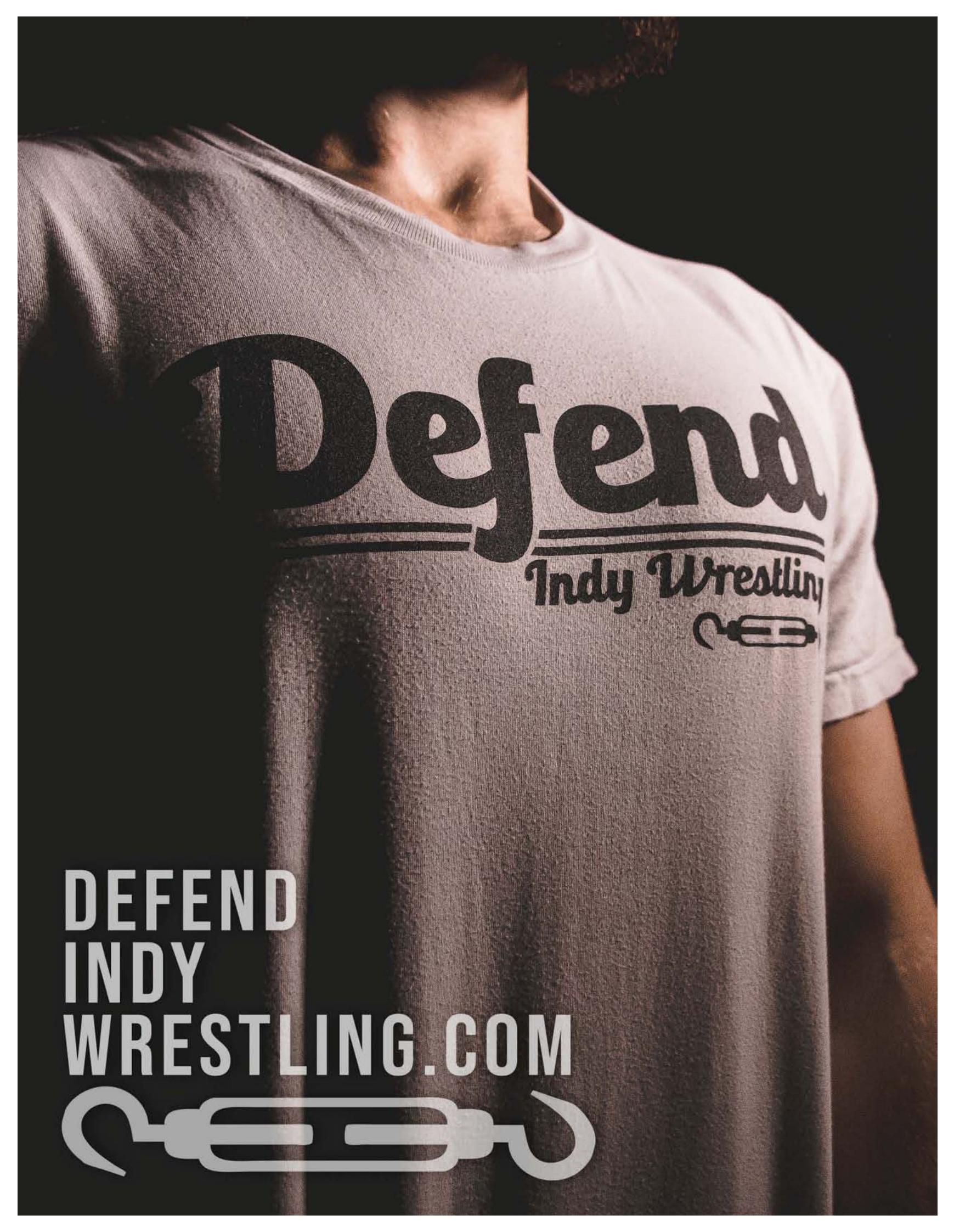
As with *The Raid* movies, some characters are defined by a gimmick – there's a pair of female killers, one of whom wields a garrotte, the other a blade – but most of the people that Ito dispatches with such savagery are indistinct minions.

Like *The Raid*, there's no humour to soften the desensitising effect of the parade of suffering on display here. The stunt work is bruising and inventive, but its impact is dulled by Tjanhanto's failure to craft a cast worth caring about. ●



IF YOU LIKE THIS

For more Iko Uwais, *The Raid* films and *Merantau* *Warrior* are all must-watch, and he can be found in *Beyond Skyline* and Keanu Reeves' excellent *Tai Chi*.

A close-up photograph of a man's torso and head. He is wearing a light gray crew-neck t-shirt. On the shirt, the word "Defend" is printed in large, bold, black, sans-serif letters. Below "Defend" are three horizontal black lines. Underneath the lines, the words "Indy Wrestling" are written in a smaller, black, cursive-style font. To the right of "Indy Wrestling" is a small, stylized black logo consisting of two interlocking shapes.

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A large, stylized, light-colored logo that reads "DEFEND". The letters are thick and have a modern, dynamic feel, with some curves and straight lines.

MANGA EXTRACT APRICOT COOKIE(S)

By Louis Lloyd-Judson

THANKS TO AUTHOR and artist Louis Lloyd-Judson, we have a great extract for you this issue, which reads Japanese style, starting on page 083! "These few pages explore the notion of 'what if the protagonist wasn't late for school?', a staple beginning in many a manga," he told us, of the following pages. "It's an extract from the first chapter which is very much an introduction to the characters and the world they inhabit. I've been working on the comic for several years now and it makes me a little nostalgic to see these early pages! I'm hoping the artwork has gradually improved over the years!"

"The basic premise [of Apricot Cookie(s)] is fairly simple; every girl in Japan is able to transform into a magical girl, all except for one! It follows the story of Apricot, a girl so desperate to become a magical girl that she fashions her life around what would be expected of a magical heroine. This makes the story feel more like a parody, but as we gradually learn more about her, the facade begins to fall away and the story becomes more of its own thing. At its heart, it's a story of a girl finding her place in the world and ultimately being able to save it against impossible odds. With many terrible jokes along the way!"

We asked Louis what inspired him to write *Apricot Cookie(s)*. "I've always gravitated more towards 'girly' stories, and magical girl stories have always held a special place in my heart. *Sailor Moon* is undeniably the greatest influence, but the comic is my tribute to everything I love – and also hate – about Japanese anime and manga.

"*Apricot Cookie(s)* is a culmination of many ideas, scrapped projects and unused concepts. It was quite miraculous how quickly and easily everything fell into place. I really loved the thought of making something so unoriginal that it became something original. I had an absolute blast writing the comic, which is evidenced by the fact that originally it was only meant to be 24 pages in length!"

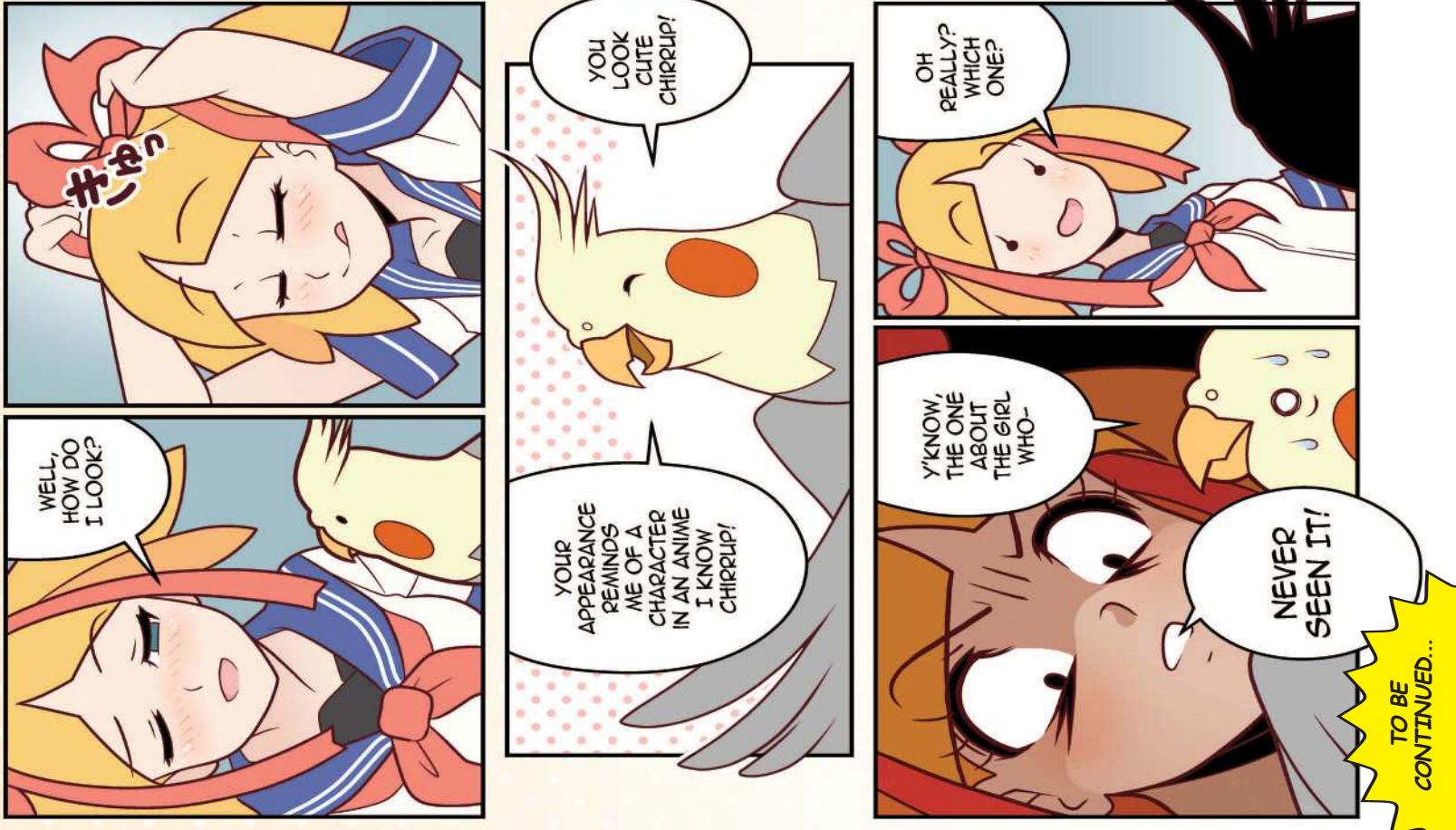
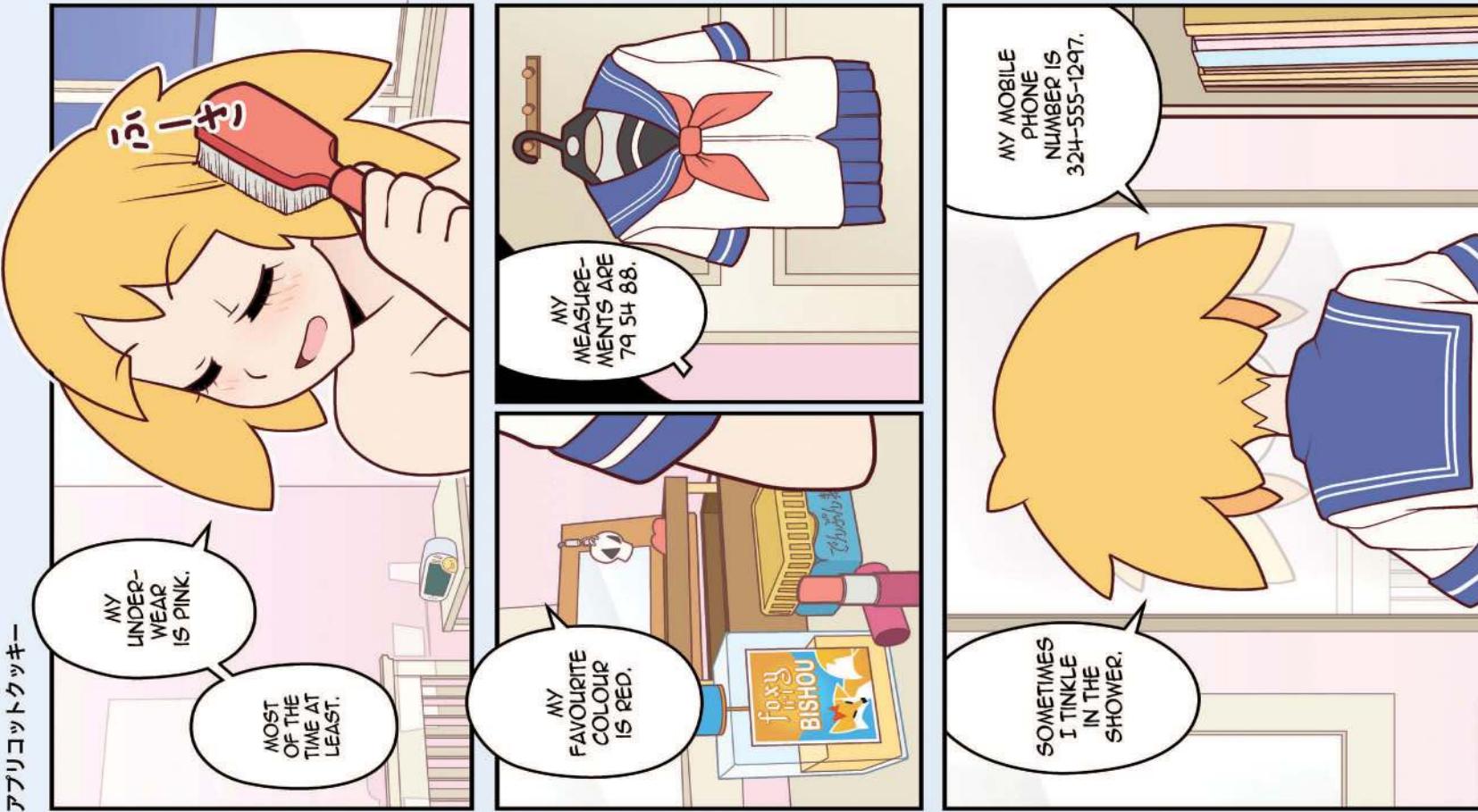
We asked Louis to share his favourite pieces of fiction with us. "The books by Roald Dahl probably had the biggest impact on me when growing up. That's a very cliché answer for any kid that grew up in Britain, but it's undeniable that there's something incredibly special about his stories and humour. Comic-wise I've always loved the Smurfs and Asterix books as well as countless series from Japan. Most notably the works by Rumiko Takahashi, Kiyohiko Azuma and CLAMP. Recently I've been captivated by *Laid-Back Camp*. That's the manga I wish I had created, it's simply wonderful!"

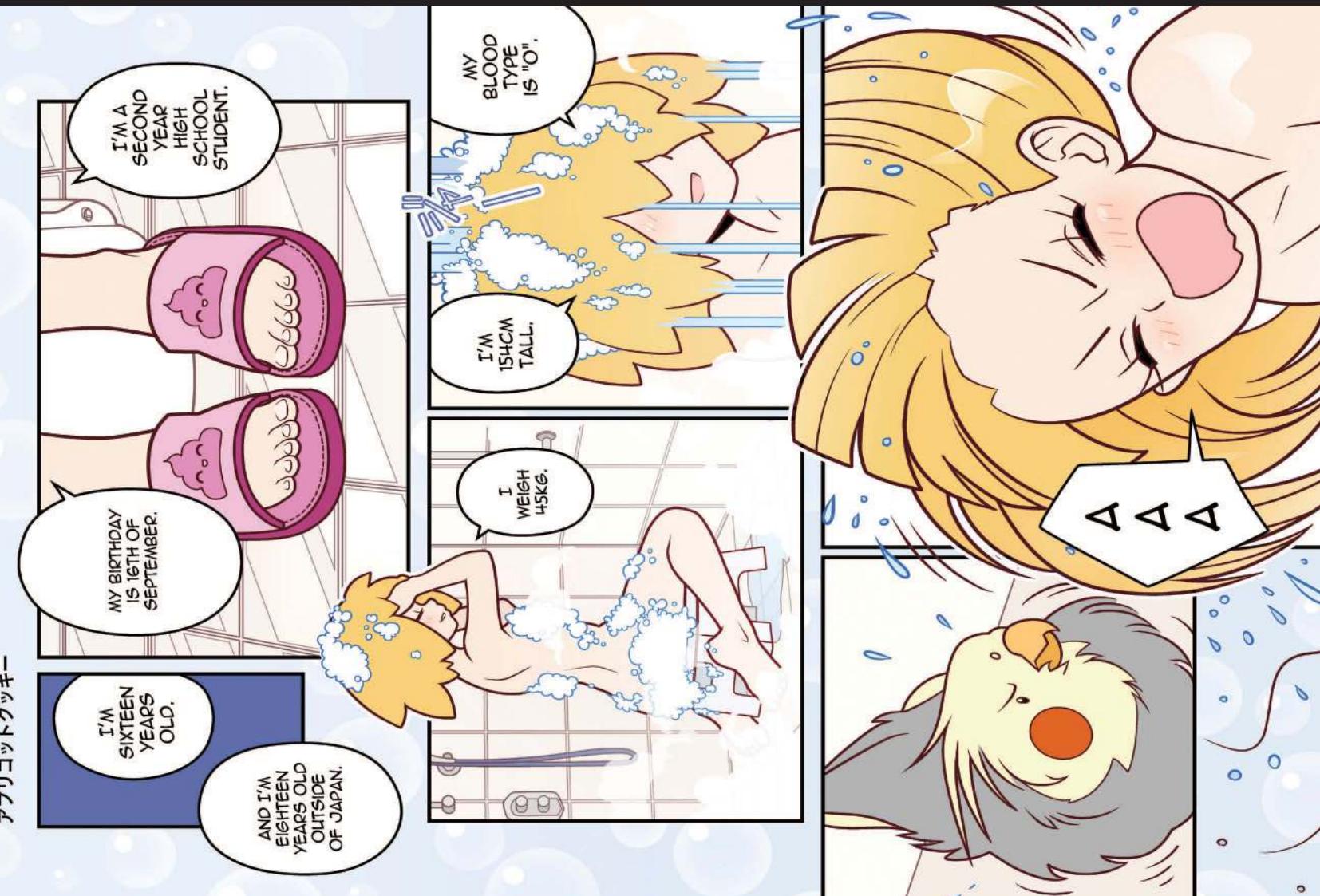
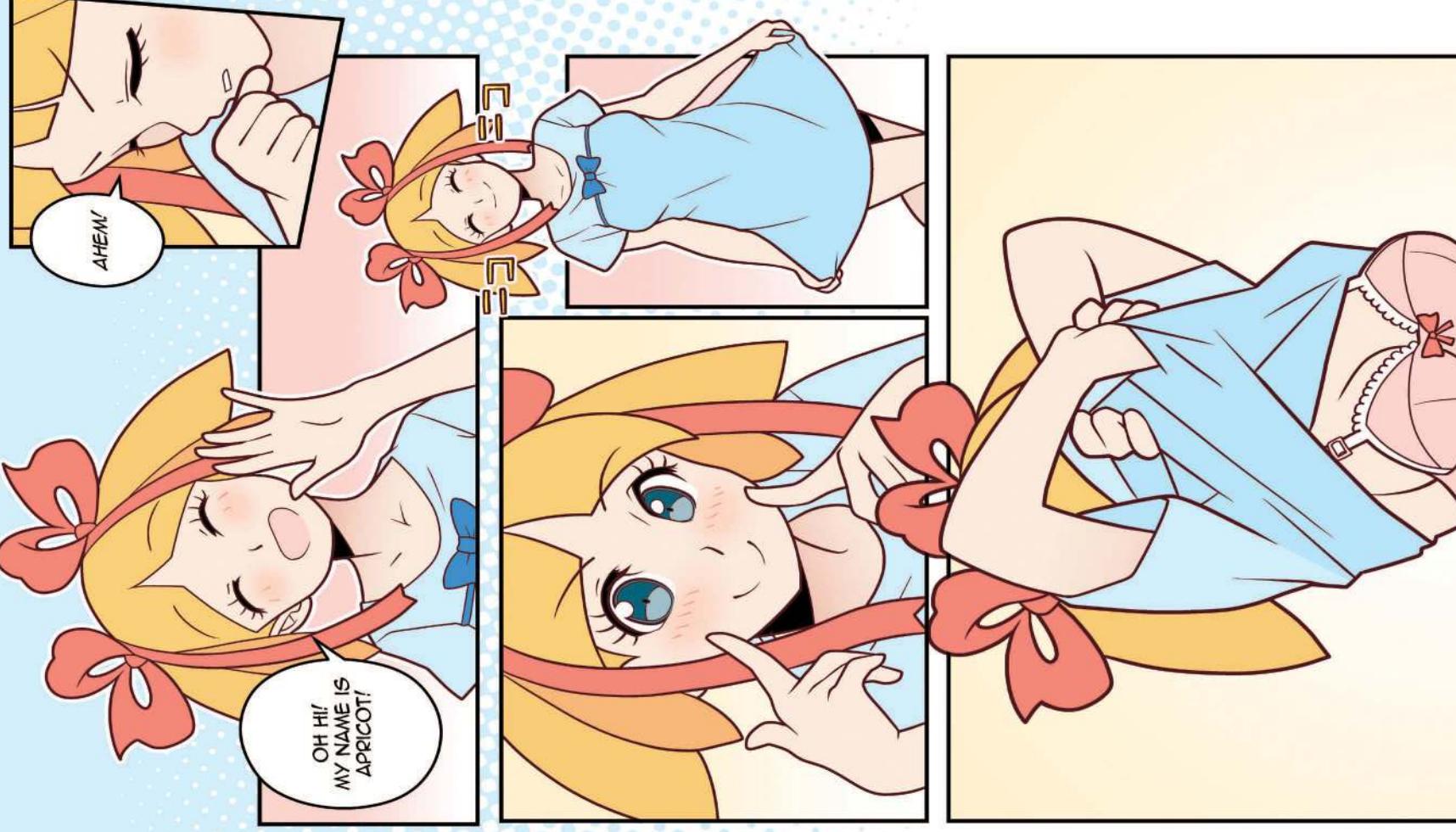
"Before *Apricot Cookie(s)* I worked with a group of comic artists much more talented than myself on a collaborative web comic project named *Scoundrels*," he told us, of his earlier projects. "It involved various different characters all sharing the same universe. It was massively fun to work on and really solidified my love for making comics."

"Also, earlier in the year I had an entry accepted for *Famicase* which is an exhibition in Tokyo featuring imaginary Famicom cartridges. Amazingly my imaginary video game concept was later created into actual games by a couple of indie game developers!"

To read *Apricot Cookie(s)*, head to <https://apricotcookies.net> as well as on the Tapas and LINE Webtoon apps. You can also follow Louis on Twitter at the handle @Louistrations.



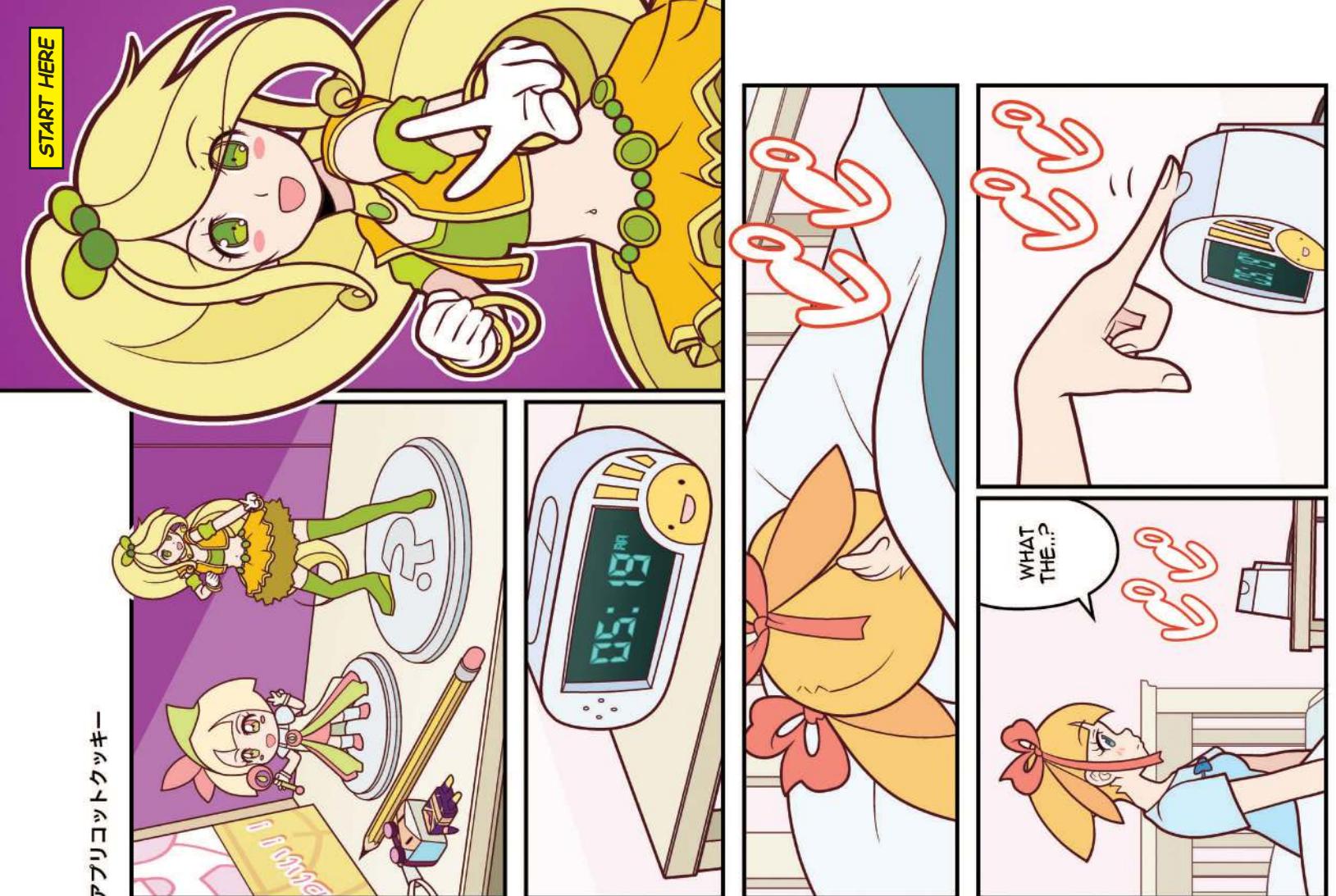




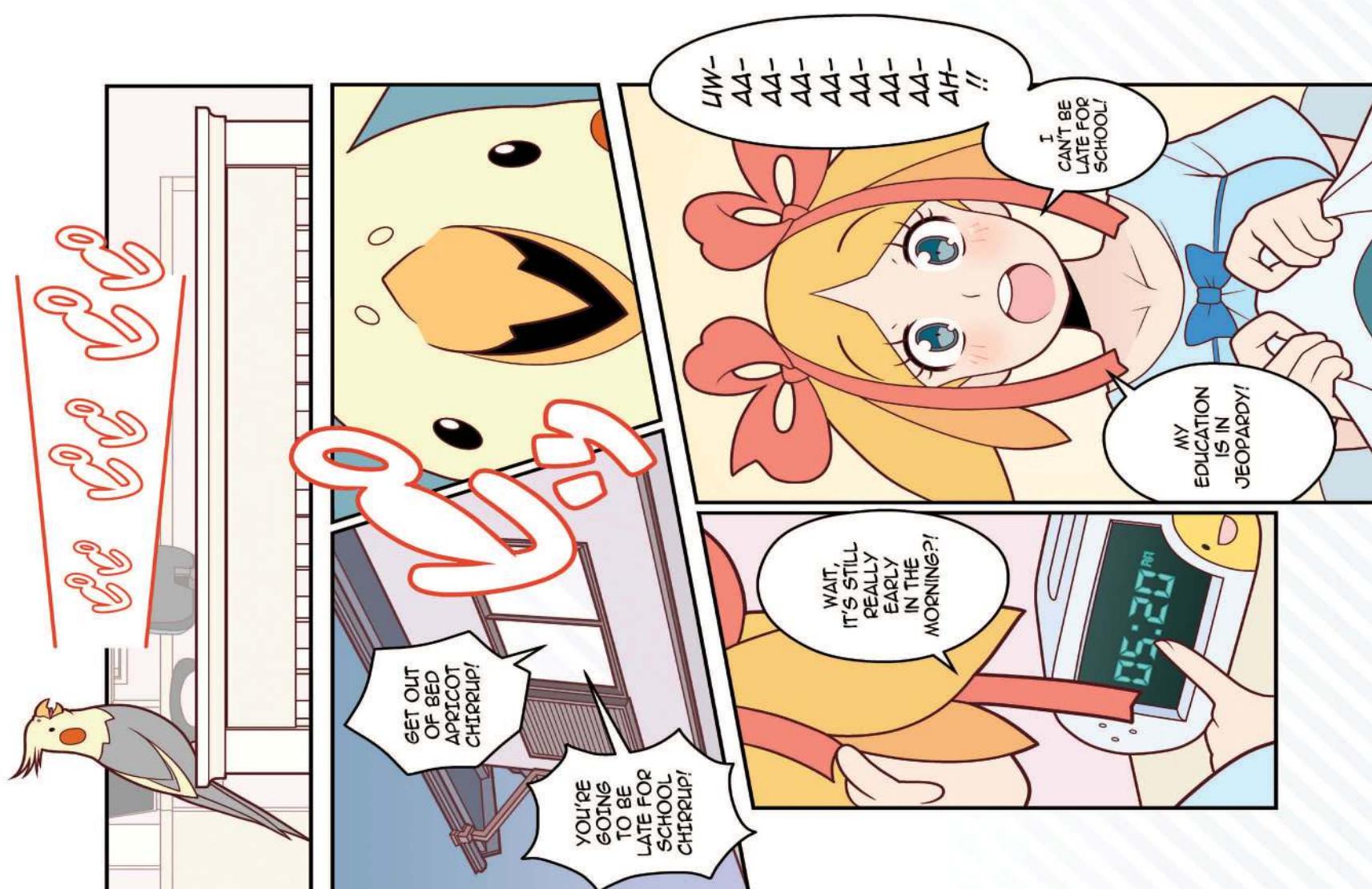




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NEXT ISSUE



PREVIEW 2019

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AND ANIME FOR THE NEW YEAR!



CHRISTMAS IN JAPAN

MARK GUTHRIE TAKES US ON A TOUR OF HIS FAVOURITE WINTER TRADITIONS FROM THE LAND OF THE RISING SUN



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Uncooked Media Ltd, PO Box 6337,

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Telephone 01202 087627

Email mail@neomag.co.uk

Web www.uncookedmedia.com

The NEO Team

Editor Gemma Cox

Group Art Editor Claire Trent

Contributors David West, Jonathan Clements, Mark Guthrie, Laurence Green, Tom Smith, Andrew Osmond, Mitchell Lineham, Emily Valentine, Alex Jones, Jacob Boniface, and Mahiru Kurumizawa

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www.terratac.com

Customer Services

+44 (0)1202 087627

contact@selectps.com

Subscription Enquiries

+44 (0)1202 087627

chris@selectps.com

Advertising & Marketing

Group Commercial Manager Rob Cox
rob@uncookedmedia.com

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428

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Get ready, bargain hunters, because this issue we have another great money-saving deal for you! New UK 12-issue subscribers will be able to save over £20 on their monthly dose of Asian entertainment for the year, and for a limited time only, they'll also be able to bag a free copy of *No Game No Life: Zero* on DVD, thanks to MVM Entertainment!

Reviewed this issue over on page 070, *No Game No Life: Zero* is a feature length outing for the *No Game No Life* anime, set six millenia before events of that series. Follow Riku, a desperate and talented leader of a colony of humans, as he tries to navigate through the 'Great War' between mythical beings, with his ragtag bunch of followers caught in the middle.

With stunning art and animation, some tender and heartfelt moments, and a dystopian theme that will grip you, *No Game No Life: Zero* is the perfect sci-fi romance movie to while away those dark, winter nights.

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WORDS BY ANDREW OSMOND

NEO RELEASE ROUND-UP

THE STATE OF THE UK MARKET THIS MONTH

WE'VE GOT A lot of reviews in this month, and the great majority of the titles scheduled to the end of this year are covered in the previous pages. But let's run down the ones that got away...

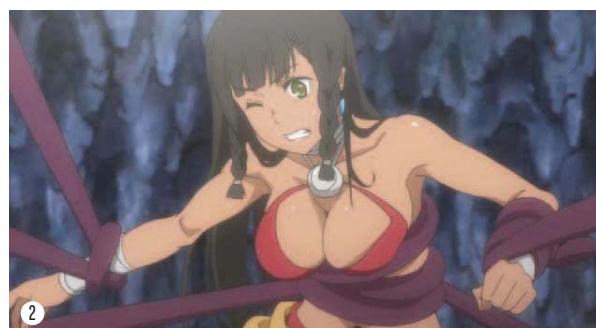
Fans of rom-coms and the work of Kyoto Animation, you lot should make a note of 10 December. That's when Manga Entertainment brings out *Love, Chunibyo and Other Delusions! Take on Me* to Blu-ray and DVD. For anyone worrying if it's a feature-length clips show, fear not – it's an all-new movie, taking the characters nearer to the fearsome territory that is the end of high school. Of course, some of you may have seen *Take on Me* already, as it had a preview at the recent London Comic Con. Come to think of it, that'd be the perfect venue for the *Chunibyo* characters to visit, should they ever jet to Britain *K-On!* style. We'd love to see Rikka's Meghan Markle cosplay. Check out our bumper movie feature on page 008 for more on the release!

Manga is also tying off its *Digimon Adventure Tri* epic with two releases on 3 December. If you've been buying each feature-length instalment as it came out, then the sixth and last part, *Our Future*, comes out that day. If you're not one for serial releases, Manga is also bringing out all six *Tri* instalments as a single Complete Movie Collection. Either way, it's on both Blu-ray and DVD.

Also on 3 December, Manga's bringing out a collected edition of both *Dragon Ball GT* seasons (64 episodes) on DVD. The third volume of *Dragon Ball Z Kai Final Chapters* follows on Blu-ray and DVD on 10 December, and the 20th *One Piece Uncut Collection* sails in on 17 December. After all, there's nothing's more Christmassy than pirates – ask Jack Sparrow.

MVM has both its Blu-ray and DVD release of *Sword Oratoria: Is It Wrong to Try To Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon? On the Side* due on 3 December. That's also the date of MVM's Blu-ray edition of *Flip Flappers*.

Anime Limited, meanwhile, is targeting the fans of idols who aren't hardcore enough to have bought the Collector's



1. *Digimon* adventures courtesy of Manga. 2. *Sword Oratoria* from MVM. 3. Manga Entertainment screened *Love, Chunibyo and Other Delusions! Take on Me* at the London MCM Comic Con. 4. Will Christmas bring a 30th anniversary edition of *My Neighbour Totoro* for you, or have you bought it already?!

Edition. (Good heavens, do such fickle idol fans exist?) A standard Blu-ray of *Love Live! Sunshine* is released on 26 November.

Ah, and we should mention one more item that snuck onto schedules recently and should be out about the time you read this. Studio Canal is releasing a "30th Anniversary" edition of *My Neighbour Totoro*, which bundles in the film on Blu-ray and DVD; the hardback *Art of Totoro* book; plus artcards, a tote bag and a magnetic sticker. What, no doll of Totoro in a Santa suit, bellowing "Ho ho ho"? No matter, this one should be making it way under your tree if you're a Studio Ghibli fan! ●

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[FILM REVIEW]

JACKIE CHAN'S PROJECT A & PROJECT A PART II

When Jackie Chan reinvented action cinema

OUT NOW // EUREKA // CERT 15 // ACTION // £29.99 (BLU-RAY) //
211 MINS

PLOT A pair of films from Jackie Chan set in the early 1900s in which he plays Ma Yu Lung, a sergeant in the Hong Kong Coast Guard. In the first, he faces gangsters and pirates, then in the second, Ma comes to the aid of some revolutionaries targeted for assassination.

Released in late 1983, *Project A* was Jackie Chan's fourth film as director, but it was a huge leap forwards for both Chan as a filmmaker and for Hong Kong action cinema itself. Chan's previous films as director were all kung fu comedies and up to this point Hong Kong martial arts cinema was almost completely dominated by period stories set in China, whether during the Qing Dynasty or early Republican period. By contrast, *Project A* is set in Hong Kong, not on the mainland, and was amongst the first action movies to articulate a distinctive Hong Kong identity that wasn't defined in relation to China. This newfound identity is expressed when Ma scolds the British admiral for not standing up for Hong Kong's citizens, and there's no sense of belonging to China. "I know that my only boss is the Queen," declares Ma.

The story is divided into three acts, each culminating in a showcase action sequence, a structure that Chan employed with regularity thereafter. The first act concerns the rivalry between the Coast Guard and the Hong Kong police, climaxing in a huge brawl. This scene is quite unlike anything in any kung fu movie. For a start, it takes place in a bar, not a teahouse or in a Shaolin Temple. It's a barroom brawl, a motif borrowed from the American western. Secondly, and crucially, there's no kung fu. Instead the highly rhythmic, balletic school of choreography that defined kung fu cinema in the 1970s is replaced by Chan's explosive, acrobatic style. Yuen Biao plays police sergeant Hong Tin-Tzu and the barroom fight is a highlight reel for Biao, Chan and the stunt team as they hurl themselves and each other into, over and through the furnishings. Forget the elegant poise of Alexander Fu Sheng and the precision of Lau Kar-Leung, *Project A* rebuilds Hong Kong action from scratch with its wild, freeform energy.

The film benefits enormously from the presence of Yuen Biao and Sammo Hung, who plays a thief called Cheuk Yat-Fei. The onscreen chemistry between the trio looks effortless and the second act focuses on Chan and Hung's characters tussling with some gangsters, before all three come together for the final act to take on the pirate Lo San Pao (Dick Wei). The peak of the middle act is an extended chase that culminates in Ma falling off a clock tower. The sequence shows Chan's love of Hollywood's classic silent film stars and the clock tower stunt typifies his daredevil, risk-taking

KEY TALENT

Dick Wei was a martial arts instructor in Taipei when he was discovered by Shaw Brothers director Chang Cheh, who persuaded him to move to Hong Kong.



style in the 1980s when he put his body through all manner of painful tests. The showdown with the pirates is superb and Dick Wei gives arguably the best performance of his career as the swaggering, swashbuckling pirate lord.

"THE HIGHLY RHYTHMIC, BALLETIC SCHOOL OF CHOREOGRAPHY THAT DEFINED KUNG FU CINEMA IN THE 1970S IS REPLACED BY CHAN'S EXPLOSIVE, ACROBATIC STYLE."

Project A Part II, released in 1987, suffers from the absence of Hung and Biao in the cast. In their place, Chan brings in several players from 1985's *Police Story*, with Bill Tung playing a Chief Inspector and Maggie Cheung as Maggie, a socialite who is friends with the activists working for Sun Yat-Sen's revolutionary cause. The sequel uses the same structure as the original film, although the overall plotline involves Chan taking down a corrupt cop called Chun (Lam Wai). The first act builds up to Ma and three of his men tangling with a group of mobsters, played by a squad of veteran Hong Kong heavies including Chan Wai-Man, Wang Lung-Wei, and Fan Mei-Sheng. It's a good sequence, although not as strong as anything in the first film.

Where the original made a rough approximation of

the early 1900s setting, the clothes and hairstyles in the sequel clearly betray the film's production in the 1980s. Likewise, the heavy use of white filters on the camera lens is unmistakably a product of its time. The second act is heavy on comedy, with a long skit in which the characters hide from each other in Maggie's apartment and there's a wonderfully inventive and acrobatic chase sequence as Ma and Chun flee from a group of axe-wielding attackers while handcuffed together.

The final act sees Ma run up against agents of the Empress Dowager sent to Hong Kong to eliminate a group raising funds for Sun Yat-Sen. Conveniently, the Imperial assassins team up with Chun, so Ma gets all his ducks lined up in a row, although anyone not familiar with this period of Chinese history may feel a trifle confused as the script makes no effort to contextualise events. The big finale is decent, but can't top the first film despite Chan hurling himself about the screen with frightening abandon. *Part II* feels the more dated of the pair thanks to the fashions and cinematography, and none of Chan's co-stars bring the same charisma to their performances as Yuen Biao and Sammo Hung.

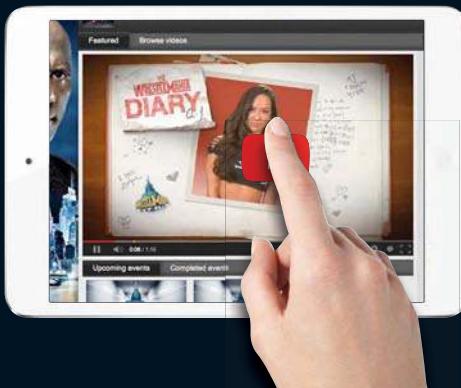
Project A is a highwater mark in Jackie Chan's career, a brilliant blend of stunts and comedy that broke new ground for Hong Kong's action filmmakers. The sequel suffers a little on comparison, lacking the appeal of Biao, Hung and Dick Wei, but still boasts some quite spectacular set pieces. ●

★★★★★

EXTRAS

Loads of interviews featuring many of the cast including Yuen Biao, plus two short films about Jackie's career and his stunt team, outtakes, and introductions from critic Tony Rayns.

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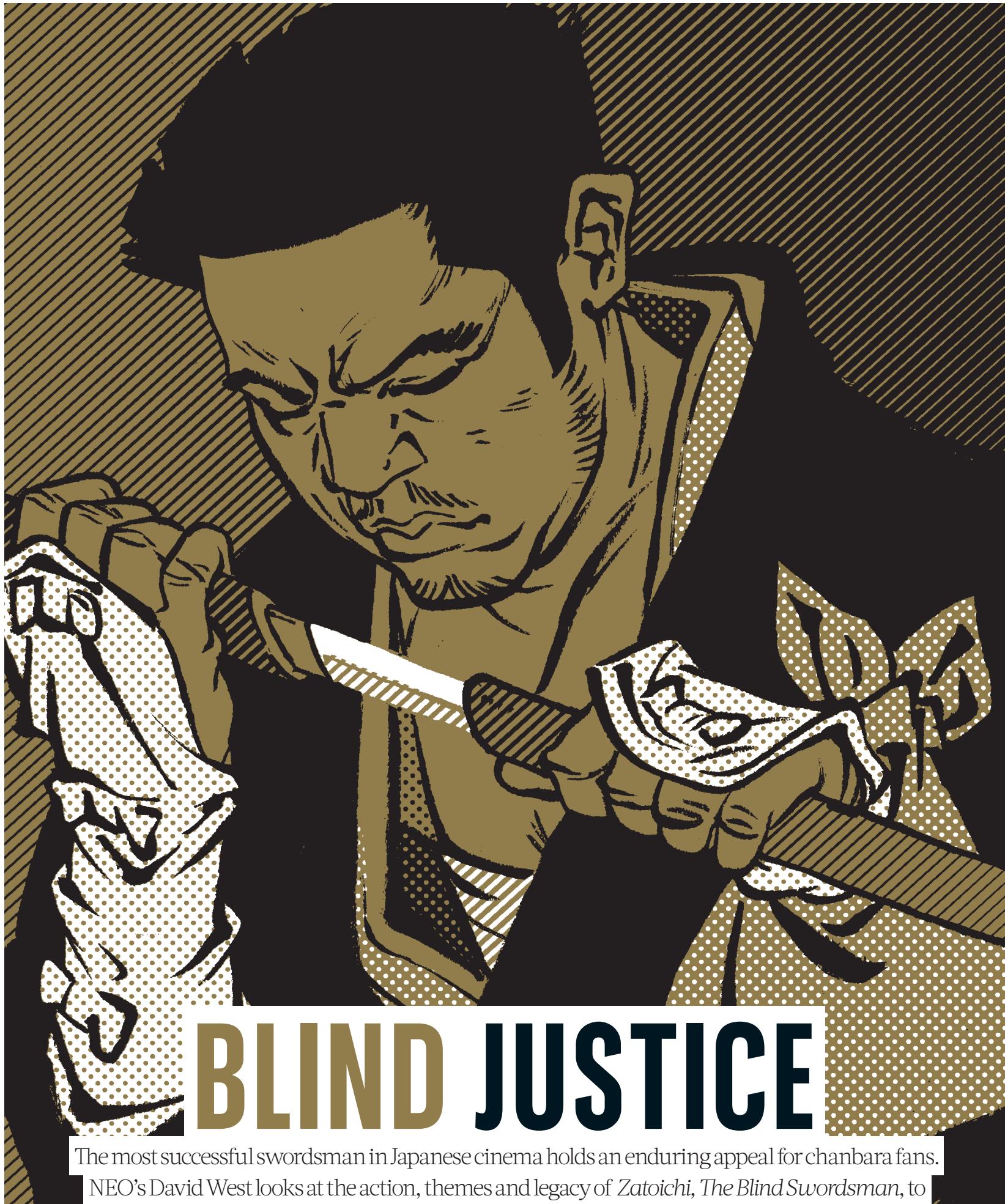
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BLIND JUSTICE

The most successful swordsman in Japanese cinema holds an enduring appeal for chanbara fans. NEO's David West looks at the action, themes and legacy of *Zatoichi, The Blind Swordsman*, to celebrate the new release from The Criterion Collection.



The Tale of Zatoichi

Life After Zatoichi

Shintaro Katsu's career wasn't limited to playing Zatoichi. He starred in the notorious and exploitative *Hanzo The Razor* series, produced the *Lone Wolf And Cub* films starring his brother Tomisaburo Wakayama, and gave one of his best performances in 1990's *Roningai* as a swordsman who's all talk and no trousers.

In the 1970s, the Japanese chanbara genre was dominated by alienated heroes like Itto Ogami of *Lone Wolf And Cub*, who travelled the land on a personal mission of vengeance, leaving scores of the dead in their wake. The humanism of the cinema of the 1950s and 1960s present in the films of Akira Kurosawa, Kihachi Okamoto and Masaki Kobayashi, faded out of fashion. But between those two extremes came a cinematic hero who was both an outsider, like Itto Ogami, and a profound humanist standing up for the vulnerable in the face of an uncaring feudalism, like the heroes of *Seven Samurai* and *Samurai Rebellion*. His name was Zatoichi, he was blind but incredibly skilled with a sword, and he became the star of the longest running swordplay series in Japanese cinema.

The character was created by author Kan Shimozawa in a short story that became the basis for 1962's *The Tale Of Zatoichi*, directed by Kenji Misumi. Played by Shintaro Katsu, Zatoichi appeared in 25 films released between 1962 and 1973. When Daiei, the original studio behind the series, ceased film production, Toho took over before the character moved onto television for four seasons. In 1989, Katsu returned to the role for one final big screen adventure, and in recent years Takeshi Kitano

and Shingo Katori have stepped into the blind swordsman's sandals. What is it that makes this character so compelling?

PERSONA NON GRATA

The series takes place in the closing decades of the Tokugawa Dynasty or the Edo Period. At that time, Japanese society was strictly hierarchical, from the samurai class at the top, merchants and artisans in the middle, and peasants beneath them. At the very bottom, below even the poorest peasant farmer, were the hinin, the non-people, which included the handicapped. This was the class to which Zatoichi belongs by virtue of his blindness. It doesn't matter that he's brave or virtuous, his disability renders him almost inhuman. As a result, Zatoichi can usually be found in the company of other social outcasts, like yakuza and prostitutes.

While the feudal system has neither sympathy nor empathy for a blind man, one of Zatoichi's defining characteristics is his compassion. Throughout his adventures, he comes to the aid of orphans and young women – invariably the former end up idolising him, the latter falling in love with him.

The Tale Of Zatoichi establishes this motif in his inaugural adventure. While staying with a yakuza boss called Sukegoro (Eijiro Yanagi), Zatoichi rescues a young woman called Otane (Masayo Banri) from her violent ex-husband. At the end of the movie, when Zatoichi leaves town, she tries to follow him, but he gives her the slip. As a hinin, Zatoichi isn't about to let Otane become a non-person, nor will he drag her into his life of violence, so instead he breaks her heart. This is another defining feature of the character. He's a wanderer, unable to settle down. Throughout the series he travels Japan, frequently pursued by someone out for revenge from a previous adventure. In this regard, Zatoichi is very much like the protagonist of Kurosawa's films *Sanjuro* and *Yojimbo*, someone living on the edges of society, haunted by their blood-stained past but unable to lay down their sword lest it catch up with them.



The Tale of Zatoichi Continues



In *Zatoichi Goes To The Fire Festival*, from 1970, the swordsman encounters a young pimp called Umeji (Peter, aka Shinnosuke Ikehata) who wants to become a yakuza and join the gang run by the malicious Yamikubo. Zatoichi, of course, teaches him the error of his ways and steers him onto a more respectable path. In the same film, Zatoichi meets Okiyo (Reiko Ohara), a beautiful young woman sent by Yamikubo to seduce him and then break his heart. Instead, Okiyo is so impressed by Zatoichi's kindness that she falls in love with him and abandons her mission. True to form, at the closing of the story, Zatoichi refuses her love and hits the road once more, off to his next adventure, forever the wandering hero, kept apart from society by his low status and his legacy of violence.

None of which is to suggest that Zatoichi is some sort of monk, sworn to celibacy and self-denial. The character is far more earthly than that. He fraternises with prostitutes and is prone to falling in love himself, it's just that he never allows a relationship to blossom. In Shintaro Katsu's final appearance as the character in 1989, Zatoichi has a sex scene with a beautiful female oyabun (yakuza boss) called Ohan (Kanako Higuchi), who leads the Bosatsu clan. It's easy to suspect that this scene was included to flatter the ego of the star himself, who also directed the movie, as it feels rather gratuitous to the plot.

Unlike the later, stoical and single-minded chanbara movies like the *Lone Wolf And Cub* series, the Zatoichi films have a lively

sense of humour. In *Zatoichi Meets The One-Armed Swordsman*, when two men try to peek in on Zatoichi with a prostitute, he drives them away by farting at them. In *Zatoichi Goes To The Fire Festival*, there's a scene of pure slapstick when the hero stops at an inn where a husband and wife engage in a very spirited squabble. These elements lighten the mood and provide a contrast to the fight scenes and the barbed social commentary of the series.

QUICKDRAW MCICHI

No chanbara series could be a success without thrilling fight scenes, and the Zatoichi films excel on this front. Under the Tokugawa Dynasty, only the samurai class were permitted to carry katana as a mark of their status. In effect, this law wasn't always enforceable – throughout the series yakuza wield katana but then they live outside the law by their very nature. Zatoichi, on the other hand, fights with a cane sword called a shikomi-zue. Because the sword has no guard to protect the wielder's hand, Zatoichi uses his weapon with a reverse grip, essentially holding it upside-down. The character is a specialist in iaijutsu, the art of drawing the sword and striking in a single, fluid motion. Like the fastest gunfighter in the west, he's incredibly quick on the draw as many of his opponents discover to their short-lived regret.

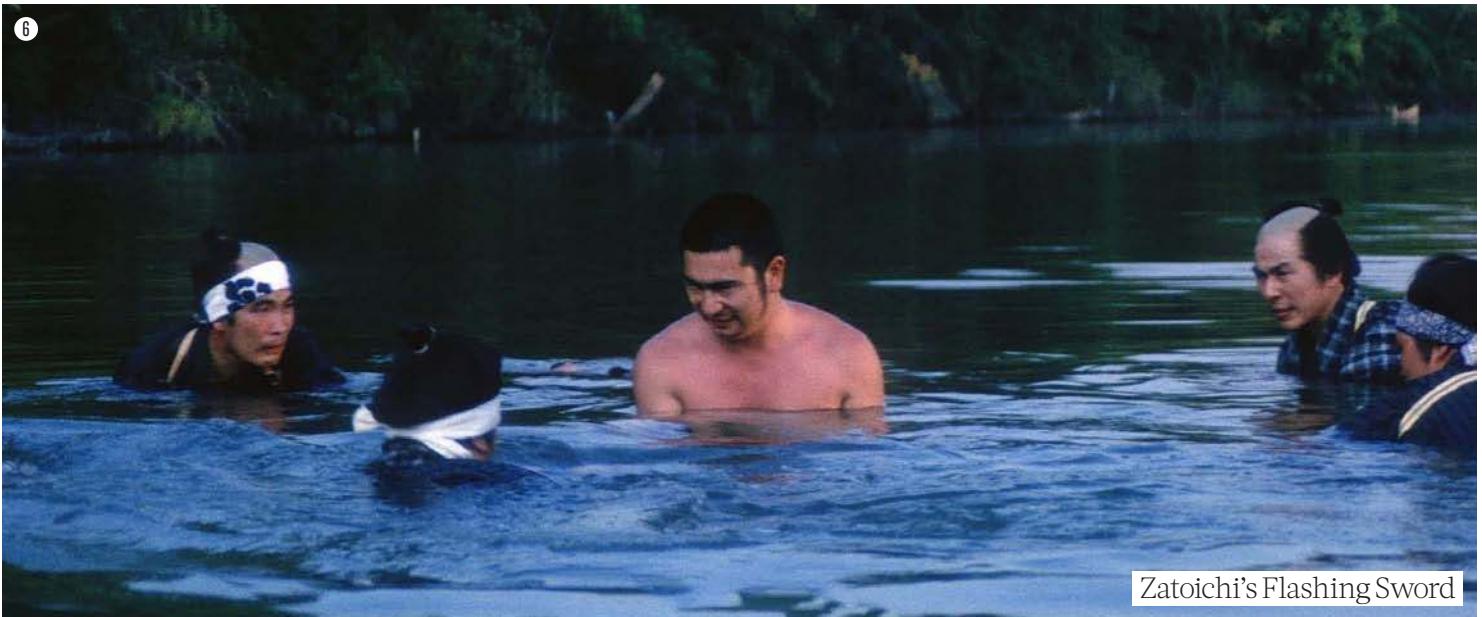
Since the character is blind, the scripts posit the idea that his other senses, particularly his hearing, are superhumanly >>>



1. Zatoichi was one of Japanese cinema's greatest wandering heroes, seen here in his 1962 debut. **2.** The first two Zatoichi films were shot in black and white, but from the third film onwards they were all in colour. **3.** Another luckless foe is about to learn a hard lesson. **4.** A few moments of quiet before the next yakuza war breaks out. **5.** The shadows are Zatoichi's allies!

The Blind Swordswoman

The popularity of Zatoichi led Shochiku Studios to adapt Teruo Tanashita's manga about a blind swordswoman. Yoko Matsuyama played Oichi, the Crimson Bat, in four films from 1969 and 1970. In addition to rescuing orphans, Oichi tended to fall in love with ronin only to be forced to slay them.



Zatoichi's Flashing Sword



Fight, Zatoichi, Fight



Zatoichi and the Doomed Man

6. Can't a guy even have a wash in peace? **7.** A man of many talents: masseur, swordsman, baby sitter. **8.** Zatoichi tries archery. It's not always the most realistic series.

>>> sharp, allowing him to pinpoint his targets by ear. Oftentimes, a recurring device is to stage the battles in circumstances that favour the blind swordsman over his sighted opponents, including fighting in the dark of a shady forest or under murky water. Shohei Miyauchi was a martial arts director on the series and outside of the Zatoichi films he worked on *An Actor's Revenge* for Kon Ichikawa, but some credit has to go to Katsu for performing his fight scenes while pretending to be sightless, by either keeping his eyes shut, or by rolling his eyes into the back of his head. Either way, it must have made his co-stars nervous to know he would be swinging a sword at them without being able to see what he was doing much of the time.

SOCIAL JUSTICE WARRIOR

When he's not rescuing orphans or keeping women from falling into disrepute, Zatoichi made a habit of befriending ronin – masterless samurai – that he would subsequently be forced to fight in a climactic duel. This was another trademark of the series established right from the outset in *The Tale Of Zatoichi*. In this instance, the blind swordsman meets a ronin called Hirate (Shigeru Amachi) who is dying of consumption. Determined to die an honourable death, Hirate insists on the duel with Zatoichi and director Kenji Misumi links the two men visually, by framing them identically in the picture before the start of their fight. It suggests the pair are tied together by fate and circumstance. The feudal system forces them to live and die by their blades and Zatoichi's victory is tinged with profound regret even as Hirate praises him. "Magnificent!" declares the ronin after Zatoichi has mortally wounded him. "Rather than getting killed by scoundrels, I wanted to die by your hand."

At the end of the battle, when a power struggle between rival gangs has left scores of men dead, the yakuza boss Sukegoro

emerges from his hiding place and starts crowing about the victory. Zatoichi erupts in a furious outburst: "Fool! Your men are lying dead in the boats. They died for no reason. What's so happy and wonderful about that? We gangsters are outlaws, shunned by society. That's why we have to honour our own code, but you act like you have the right to raise your face to the sun without shame. You fool!"

The hero delivers variations on this speech throughout the series, scolding any oyabun or yakuza who takes joy in death or suffering, or who forgets their place as outcasts. In *Zatoichi Goes To The Fire Festival*, yakuza boss Yamikubo runs an extortion racket, squeezing money from the farmers and killing those who resist. Thus, in the grand finale when Zatoichi's patience has run out, he scolds Yamikubo even as he slays his men, telling him, "Gangsters like us must always keep the backstreets, men like you walk the highway and force aside the locals, you kill them without so much as a thought. And you call that making amends for your ancestors' sins? People like you shouldn't be allowed to live."

GUEST STARS

Two icons of swordplay cinema had crossovers with Zatoichi. Toshiro Mifune co-starred in 1970's *Zatoichi Meets Yojimbo*, directed by the great Kihachi Okamoto. Despite the title, Mifune doesn't actually play the same character that he portrayed in Akira Kurosawa's films *Yojimbo* and *Sanjuro*, but it's still a treat to see him sharing the screen and crossing swords with Katsu. In 1971, in a co-production between Hong Kong and Japan, Katsu went up against Jimmy Wang Yu in *Zatoichi And The One-Armed Swordsman*. Wang's career was built around playing warriors with a limb missing in *One-Armed Swordsman* and *One-Armed Boxer* but his

Katsu Vs Kurosawa

Shintaro Katsu was supposed to star in *Kagemusha* for Akira Kurosawa, but they fell out. When filming started, Katsu brought along a video camera so that he could record and review his own performance. Noting that there could only be one director on set, Kurosawa promptly replaced Katsu with Tatsuya Nakadai.



"AT THE VERY BOTTOM, BELOW EVEN THE POOREST PEASANT FARMER, WERE THE HININ, THE NON-PEOPLE, WHICH INCLUDED THE HANDICAPPED. THIS WAS THE CLASS TO WHICH ZATOICHI BELONGS BY VIRTUE OF HIS BLINDNESS. IT DOESN'T MATTER THAT HE'S BRAVE OR VIRTUOUS, HIS DISABILITY RENDERS HIM ALMOST INHUMAN."

collaboration with Katsu and director Kimiyoshi Yasuda is not entirely successful. That's in part because their screen fighting styles are so different. Wang's one-armed heroes spend a lot of time leaping through the air with the aid of trampolines, and his Peking Opera style martial arts look theatrical next to Katsu's lethal quickdraw efficiency. But Wang clearly took a lot away from the experience and many of his later films, like *Beach Of The War Gods* and *Blood Of The Dragon* show the influence of Japanese chanbara cinema.

THE LEGACY

Zatoichi has been revisited and reinterpreted in the years since Shintaro Katsu's final outing in 1989. The best-known revival of the character is Takeshi Kitano's 2003 film titled *Zatoichi* in which Kitano both stars and directs. The film ticks off many boxes for a standard Zatoichi narrative – he protects two orphans and fights a climactic duel against a ronin called Hattori (Tadanobu Asano) – but Kitano puts his own stamp on

the format. Where Katsu's Zatoichi was an emotional fellow, full of pathos, humour and a fiery sense of justice, Kitano plays a much more detached character, which is typical of his performance style. At the closing of the film, Kitano parodies the ending of many chanbara films in which the hero walks off into the horizon as peasants sing while labouring in the fields. To spoof the convention, Kitano stages a full-blown musical number complete with tap dancing.

Shingo Katori took the lead in 2010's *Zatoichi: The Last*, which did away with the notion of the character as a wandering stray dog hero, giving him a wife and home. As for the original, Shintaro Katsu passed away in 1997, leaving behind a legacy unparalleled in chanbara cinema. His performance as Zatoichi remains the standard against which all others will forever be measured.

Zatoichi: The Blind Swordsman, containing the original 25 films from 1962 to 1973, is out on Blu-ray on 19 November from The Criterion Collection, and is available from Amazon. ● >>>

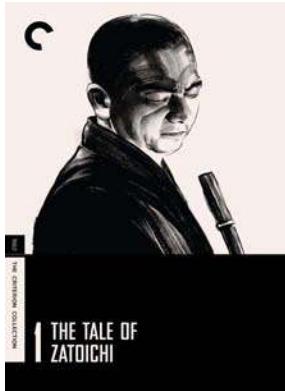
9. The Criterion Collection boxset, full of extra goodies!

10. The Fire Festival really lived up to its name. 11. Sometimes even a lowly hinin can enjoy the finer things in life, usually when a wealthy oyabun wants to hire Zatoichi's deadly blade!

Zatoichi In America

In 1989, the same year that Katsu's final Zatoichi film was released in Japan, director Phillip Noyce's *Blind Fury* came out in the west. Based on the plot from *Zatoichi Challenged* directed by Kenji Misumi, Noyce's film stars Rutger Hauer as a blind swordsman protecting a young boy from mobsters.

BLIND JUSTICE All 25 films contained in Zatoichi: The Blind Swordsman from the Criterion Collection



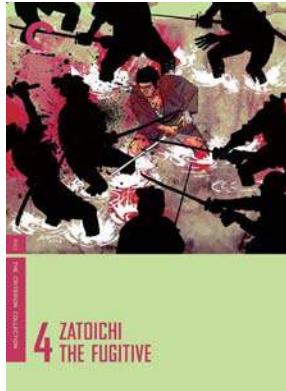
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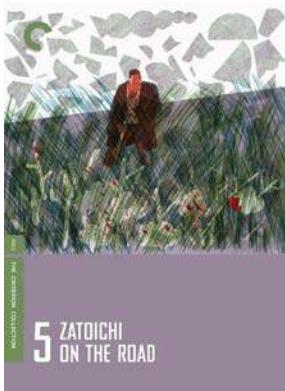
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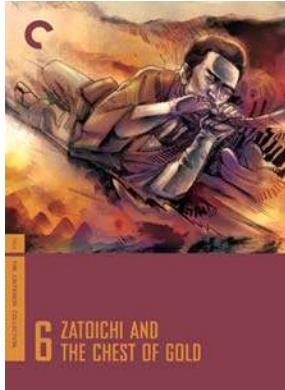
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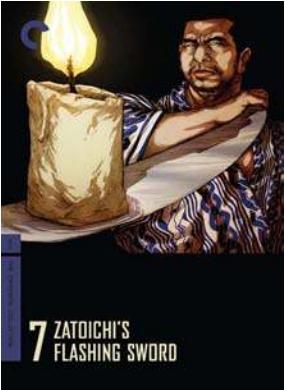
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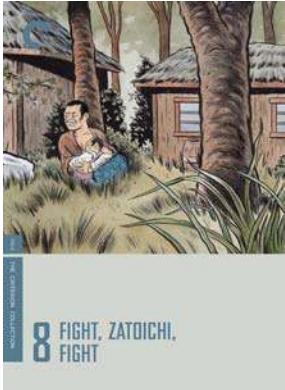
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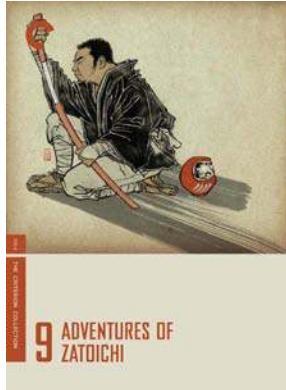
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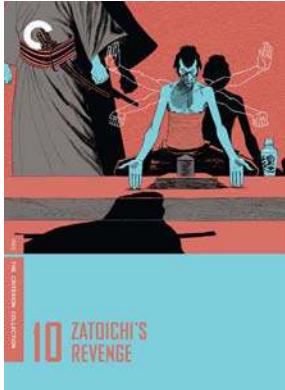
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FLASHING SWORD



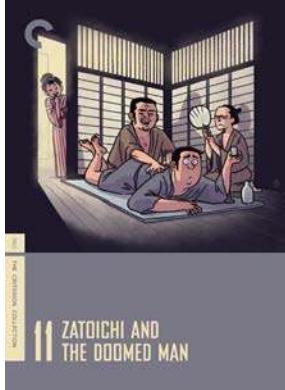
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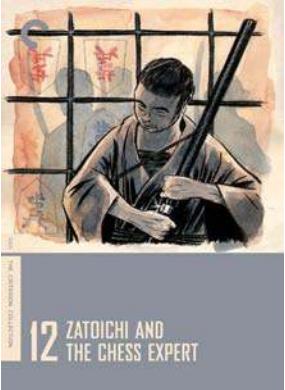
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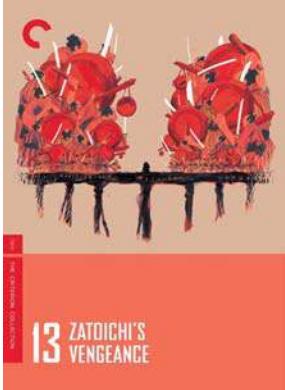
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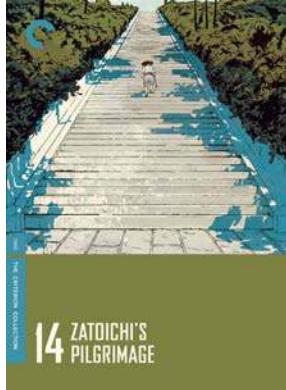
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THE DOOMED MAN



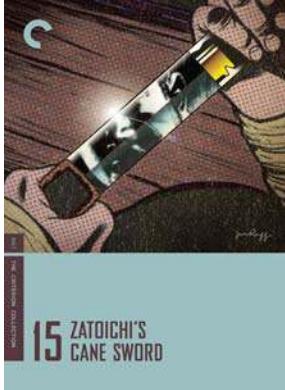
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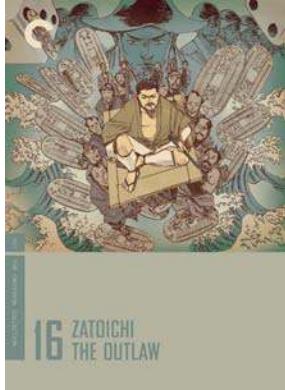
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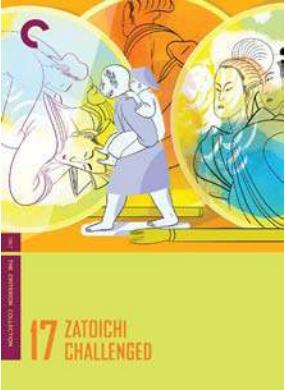
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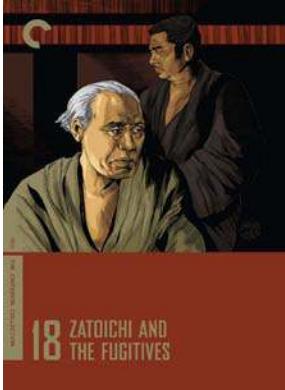
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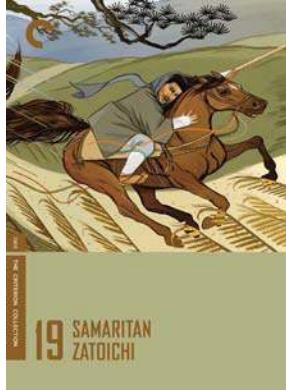
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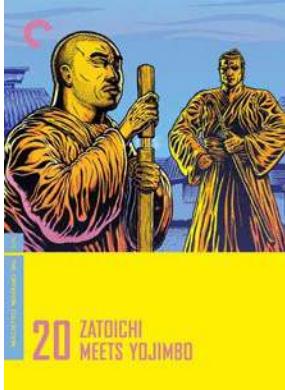
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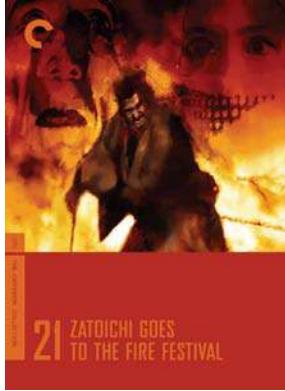
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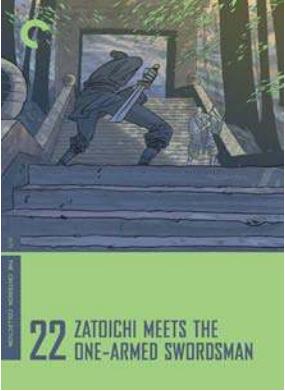
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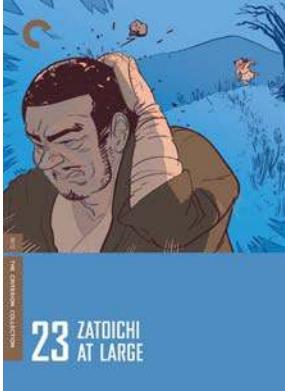
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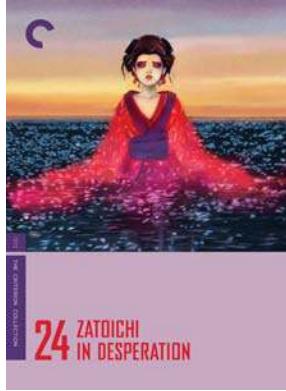
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